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EDITOR'S NOTES
by Cathleen Jordan

We can tell you very little more about this issue's Mystery Classic, "The Puzzle," than is contained in the note at the bottom of the first page of the story. We found the story in the old book indicated there, *Library of the World's Best Mystery and Detective Stories,* in a volume devoted to English and Irish tales.

But there is something that might be useful to readers of "The Puzzle." That story is preceded in the volume by another, titled "The Pipe," which involves the same characters. For the sake of such background as "The Pipe" reveals, here are a few segments of it.

On Tress and Pugh: "[Tress] and I are rival collectors. I am not going to say, in so many words, that his collection of pipes contains nothing but rubbish, because, as a matter of fact, he has two or three rather decent specimens. But to compare his collection to mine would be absurd. Tress is conscious of this, and he resents it. He resents it to such an extent that he has been known, at least on one occasion, to declare that one single pipe of his—I believe he alluded to the Brummagem relic preposterously attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh—was worth the whole of my collection put together. . . . Tress, by the way, has been an army surgeon."

On Martin Brasher (who is mentioned on page 141): "Brasher is an old friend of mine. We have a common ground—ghosts."

On Bob (first mentioned on

(continued on page 40)

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Parting Shot

by Terry Courtney

Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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The comfortable living room in Arlington still bore the chintzy personal touches of the admiral's late wife. Admiral Niemann was slumped in his favorite overstuffed chair, petulantly eyeing his unexpected visitor. Lean, hawk-faced, and bald on top, the admiral was clad in jogging sweats and sneakers, having been on the way out to his afternoon five miles when the man surprised him at the front door.

"Official visit?" the admiral said with marked bitterness. "I've been out of it for over five years, ever since that ham, who couldn't spell intelligence let alone define or analyze it, was persuaded I was past it. True, you occasionally call upon me, but always in the dark of night for fear administration tattletales might see you. I've been consulted, asked to render opinions, sought out to devise and revise delicate operations, even to evaluate personnel on several sides, including ours. But always, repeat emphatically, *always* unofficially. I've been pledged to secrecy more often than Marilyn Monroe. I'm not good enough to be official any more. So what the hell are you doing here in the middle of the afternoon, *officially?* You must be suicidal, careerwise." When the other man failed to respond the admiral added, "That last was a joke, facetiouswise."

Seated across from the admiral on one end of a long sofa, CIA director Stuart Daniels cleared his throat like a man about to orate loud and long. He was dressed like any conservative banker or businessman, while behind his rather ordinary middle-aged face lurked a thousand dirty secrets. The admiral knew him well, for Daniels had worked for him when the admiral headed the Company.

Daniels said, "Circumstances change, admiral, and this *is* official. My authority, White House blessing. We are faced with a situation and need your input. I understand your personal pique at the current ruling party and always have, but official or unofficial, what's the difference? Your country needs your help."

The admiral, bitterly unhappy on the shelf and no more immune to flattery than most humans, suppressed a joyous grin. "Put that way, I'll be glad to help, as usual."

Daniels nodded. "I counted on that, and I'm grateful. We have a golden opportunity we can't afford to waste."

The admiral made a valiant effort at outward calm, but his

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eyes glowed with the old excitement.

Daniels slid a file bearing the Top Secret red diagonal stripe out of his attaché case and opened it. "I'll begin with a name: Sergé Grumadin."

The admiral prodded his memory. "Sorry, no bell."

"With good reason, but I know you remember Sara Lee."

The admiral looked puzzled for a moment as he flashed on pastry, then nodded once, thumping the arms of his chair. "Oh yes. Real name Saralikin. European paymaster for the KGB."

"Correct. And for the past seven years or so Comrade Sergé Grumadin has been Sara Lee's courier, operating under cover as a cultural attaché in their Paris embassy. Nothing more than an errand boy, traveling around Europe paying agents and networks for Sara Lee. Until eight weeks ago truly a minor player."

"From that I assume this Grumadin suddenly had a star pinned to his dressing room door?"

As Daniels turned over several sheets, his short laugh held no mirth at all. "Eight weeks ago, in Paris, the police raided a private club that catered to members of both sexes who prefer the companionship of children."

"Pedophiles!" The admiral snarled the word. "They should all be spayed and neutered. Filthy perverts."

"Agreed. Among those arrested was Grumadin, who was caught cavorting with two girls, the older fifteen. He and everybody else present were hauled off to the nearest police station. Normally Grumadin would have claimed diplomatic immunity, flashed his credentials, the embassy contacted, and Grumadin would have walked. But history does indeed have a way of repeating itself, for three years ago, in Hamburg, Grumadin was arrested in a similar playpen. That time he claimed his immunity, the local embassy shook him loose, and the next day he was back in Moscow, armpit deep in waste matter. To this day he can't say why he was given another chance, but he got off with a warning that if that sort of blackmail-inspiring conduct ever happened again he was history. So there he was in Paris in a terrifying dilemma. If his embassy finds out, the least he can look forward to is a long, chilly, and depressing stay in the gulag. A bullet through the back of his head was also a distinct possibility. Grumadin loves his country, but with the nitty-gritty came the realization he

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was much more fond of himself and his continued existence than he was of Ma Russia."

The admiral made a face. "Also, there would be a definite scarcity of little girls in Siberia. The man's garbage."

Daniels went ahead. "So Grumadin took a Sûreté inspector into a corner, claimed he was an important Russian spy, and asked the Frenchman to contact the British. MI-6. He wanted to defect."

The admiral chuckled. "Wise choice. London will take anybody these days, or so I've heard."

"The Sûreté inspector was one of ours in that he passes us odd scraps of information that come his way and we pay by the piece. Instead of contacting the British, he called Sam Shields, who is now running our Paris office."

"I remember Sam. Good man."

"The best," Daniels agreed, his eyelids dropping for a moment. He did not suffer interruptions well while on center stage, and the admiral had this annoying habit. "Sam went through channels, and in two days Grumadin was at Camp Peary. We let him simmer for three days, then the diggers went to work. At first it was junk. Most of the names we already knew about. He did identify a few new minor agents and one network flushing embassies in Bonn. After three weeks we were sorry we had taken him and discussed doubling him back, but we couldn't figure out how to manage it. He isn't important enough to survive his disappearance."

The admiral smiled knowingly. This was thinking he understood.

Daniels turned more pages. When he looked up, his expression was grim. "But Comrade Grumadin had a twenty-four carat nugget in reserve. We believe he held back so that when he finally handed it over it would seem that much larger. Make us work for it, and all would be worthwhile. So after three weeks of nothing Grumadin showed us his vein of gold."

The admiral snorted disdainfully. "Where would an errand boy get gold? What was it?"

"Vasily Rosnikov."

The admiral jerked upright, gripping the arms of his chair. "Rosnikov? Impossible. That old Bolshevik wouldn't give scum like Grumadin a sip of water if he was dehydrating, let alone make him privy to vital information. Grumadin has nothing on Rosnikov, and that's a fact, whatever you bought."

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"Please hear me out, admiral. Grumadin didn't have information we can use against Rosnikov."

"Well, all right." The admiral relaxed again.

Daniels closed the file. He knew the rest by heart. "We know for a fact that Rosnikov runs the really important KGB operations in Europe. The real agents and moles. And we have long suspected we have a double in our European section. You yourself mounted an investigation in your time."

"It came to nothing. I was fired too soon."

"The signs are there, as you well know. Too many blown operations, agents, networks. Low grade defectors who claimed there were broad hints from Rosnikov's staff. The very manner in which the Russians operated. It all points to a leak. I've chased it twice, you once, and your predecessor twice. We all came up zero. But now it seems we have proof we were right."

"From Grumadin?" the admiral asked, his tone deliberately overloaded with sarcasm.

"Grumadin was briefed on his new duties for Sara Lee by the man he was replacing, one Salkin. Salkin mentioned that during the time he worked for Sara Lee, eight years, he had also been doing a secret courier job for Rosnikov, unknown to Sara Lee. Sure enough, as soon as Grumadin took over, he was called in by Rosnikov. It was the same routine Salkin had described. Once a month an envelope containing cash came to Grumadin in the embassy diplomatic pouch, along with the names of a city and a bank plus an account number. Grumadin deposited the cash in the account, each account used twice. That was it. But Salkin had told Grumadin the cash was payment to a double agent. An American mole."

The admiral suddenly seemed to lose interest. "Good lord, Stuart, that is nonsense. How would Salkin know that? Rosnikov would never tell him. And given that double agent payments might be a logical assumption, why American? Why not British or French or Italian? No, scratch that last. Not even the KGB would waste money buying an Italian. But can't you see that Salkin couldn't know that? Grumadin is trying to pay his entry fee with meadow muffins."

Daniels' face grew weary lines. The admiral watched too much TV. Meadow muffins sounded like Colonel Potter. "That was my first thought until Grumadin told us the last envelope he received from Rosnikov, two weeks before he de-

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fected, contained a note stating it was in fact the last one. Grumadin's services were no longer required by Rosnikov."

"So Rosnikov is switching couriers or method of payment. Or the double died. Or defected. How do you read it?"

"Perhaps the double is suddenly no longer in a position to be of service." Daniels got up and went to stare out the window at rosebushes dying of neglect now that the admiral's wife was gone.

"That's what I just said." After a moment the admiral snapped, "Well?" at Daniels' back.

The director returned to his seat. "Chris Canterbury is retiring. Friday is his last day."

The admiral rubbed his forehead, heaving a sigh of exasperation. "Stuart, listen to me carefully. I've said this before, and this is the last time. If there is a double, it could not possibly be a field agent. It has to be someone higher up. No field agent ever had access to all the information the other side seemed to receive. At any given moment, a field agent knows no more than his own current area of activity. That is a prime rule. Whoever was feeding the Russians knew it all. And you know who my candidate is. I can't understand why he's still in place, although I admit it was my mistake in the first place taking him out of the field and making him head of European Field Operations. As soon as I did that, the information flow eastward seemed to increase fivefold."

"I know. John Axtell. The reason he is still on board is that after the Angelton fiasco twenty years ago and the big settlement that cost the budget, I don't dare dump a man on mere suspicion. That needs proof. Twice I tried to uncover a double, including your flavor of the month in the sweep, and I got nothing. But don't count Canterbury out of the running, or the other three senior field agents who qualify."

The admiral mumbled something that might have been "Bah, humbug."

Daniels ignored it. "We both know agents confide in each other, compare notes, the rules be damned. And did you know that Sam Shields in the Paris office and Canterbury were once brothers-in-law?"

"No."

"Sam was married to Canterbury's younger sister for a few years. She died young of natural causes, but Sam and Chris are still quite close. There's no telling what information Sam might have innocently confided to a best friend over a bottle of Asbach Uralt. Also, Canter-

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bury is one of those charming people everyone likes. Pumping any stationmaster without that person's being aware would be elementary for Chris."

"What did you mean about field agents who qualify? You make it sound like the Olympics."

"There are only four who have been out there during the time we know the payments were made: Porten, Wallace, Canterbury, and Thayer."

"If you insist." The admiral leaned his head back, eyes closing, seemingly bored with the direction the conversation had taken.

"Please bear with me, admiral," Daniels said, realizing he was losing his friend. "About two years ago Grumadin, knowing he was walking a tightrope because of that nasty habit possessing him, began to keep a list of the banks and account numbers. Something to sell if he ever needed an out."

"How convenient."

"We walked the list backward, and the information checked. All the accounts were opened, two deposits made, the account closed, the balance taken in cash. At the last two banks we found tellers who remembered the man who withdrew the money. The last one, a bank in Nice, is small, and the teller remembered because the man was not a regular and had bright yellow hair, mustache, and beard. The teller claimed the hair was theatrical and obviously false. The teller before that, in Ostend, was female and remembered because the man with the silly wig and false beard had sweet-talked her. Both tellers said the man was tall, which might eliminate Wallace, who is five six and would never be described as tall. The fact that it was a man might also eliminate Thayer, who could be mistaken for many things, but never a man."

The admiral cocked open one eye. "I remember Pat Thayer. A remarkably healthy young woman."

"Indeed. We pasted up file photos of our three men with yellow hair, beard, and mustache, but neither teller made an identification. But they both said something vital. The man was an American."

The admiral slid upright. "That is interesting, but not conclusive." His eyes were bright again. "That can be faked."

"Granted, but it can't be overlooked. As for the lack of identification, any of them, including Thayer, could have had a friend do his or her banking."

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"Or Axtell. Assuming Axtell did not make six timely trips to Europe each year, he could have also used an intermediary. At least be flexible. Include Axtell in your possibilities."

"All right," Daniels conceded. "But remember, each account was in a different name. Field agents know where to buy the best fake passports in any name like you and I know where to buy hot dogs and aspirin."

"Axtell, too. He was in the field for years, and I'm certain he still has contacts over there."

"Your fixation on Axtell is unreasonable, admiral."

"And your defense of him is dangerous. Of course, it is also possible the double is even higher placed than Axtell. Has that ever occurred to you? It occurred to me."

"Yes, but if the people responsible for checks and counterchecks at that level can't come up with anything, I have to concentrate on the most likely area of investigation. Also, it is a basic assumption that if there is a highly placed double the information passed would cover all our operations and interests, but as far as we can determine the leaks were concentrated within our European sphere. It has to be someone on the Europe side."

"Exactly what do you want from me, Stuart?"

"This is the first concrete evidence that there at least might be a double. I want you to help me write a scenario using Grumadin's information, using Rosnikov and the bank accounts. Cause the double to self-destruct. I want that person trapped, hoist, skewered, and destroyed on his or her own petard."

"And your money is riding on Canterbury?"

"He's the best fit."

"You're wrong," the admiral said without inflection, almost to himself. "Let's go to work."

The admiral and Daniels worked long into that Tuesday evening, and on Thursday the curtain went up on a play within the charade that is the intelligence community within the grand illusion that is the government.

Canterbury sipped his bourbon, gazing out the office window at the gentle night rain rinsing the grime off Washington. Off to his right the Lincoln Memorial glowed inside a fuzzy halo.

"Thirty years living on the edge," Canterbury said quietly. "My God, that's a career in any

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league. There were a few times when I was certain I would not live to see this day. It was raining just like this that night in Zagreb when Plon had me dead in his sights until that stranger's blessed seeing eye dog jumped on him. I think that was the closest I came to biting the big one."

"Paris," Axtell offered.

Canterbury turned from the window, nodding. "Yes, Paris. That car thief had to be the unluckiest man in recorded history. What was left of him they could have buried in a sardine can. The explosion blew a hat rack through the wall of a café." Canterbury slowly shook his head at the grisly memory. "Both times I was too close to something."

Tall and, at fifty-five, lean and still fit, Canterbury's thick hair was snow white and styled short, his pleasant face unlined. Distinguished would describe him, and the last guess of the uninitiated as to his profession would be what he actually was, or had been for the past thirty years until this night, a field agent for the CIA. A Company man. A deniable man.

Canterbury crossed to the liquor cabinet and added generously to his glass. He offered the decanter to John Axtell, seated behind his desk.

Axtell murmured, "No, no more." He rarely drank and ate only health foods, but no one would know it to look at him. Three years younger than Canterbury, he looked ten years older. He had slipped directly from young to old, as if his work had denied him middle age. His hair was dirty gray, his face a slightly cleaner gray, drawn and deeply creased. He seldom smiled, and around Langley it was said no one had ever heard him laugh. Canterbury, who had worked for him for the past nine years, supposed he liked him as well as he could like anybody in the Company.

Canterbury sat on one of the visitors' chairs in front of the desk and propped an ankle on a knee. "I heard they were taking this special office away from you. Make you operate out of Langley all the time like the rest of the head spooks. True?"

Axtell shrugged. "That's the rumor, but nothing official yet. I don't use this place much any more. Only for matters of very special importance."

"Like saying goodbye to me?" Canterbury asked through a chuckle.

Axtell nodded once.

Canterbury drank and made a sweeping gesture with his glass. "Have you ever wondered about all this, John? Why we do it?"

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Axtell yanked at an earlobe. "No, I never wonder," he said impatiently. "I simply do the job I pledged to do the best I can."

"Why?"

Axtell frowned, squinting. "Why do I do my job the best I can?"

"No. Why did you agree to do it in the first place? Do you consider yourself a patriot?"

Axtell swiveled his chair sideways to stare out the window. "I never consciously thought in that term, but perhaps that's it. Love of country. Maintaining the balance. Keeping the peace. It all seems part of the same emotion."

Canterbury sighed and drained his glass. Axtell was more brittle and edgy than usual and missing his point. Canterbury went for a refill and sat down again, talking all the while. "Now that it's over, I've been indulging in too much thought for my own comfort. In all those years did I make any difference? Did one effort I put forth matter one way or the other?"

"You had more than your share of successes, Chris. You know that."

"Some successes, sure. Perhaps even a few triumphs. But the other side had their successes and triumphs, too. It all seems to have been an endless series of stalemates. We never win, we just don't lose. Stalemates. But the point is, with the weaponry on all sides today, the unthinkable destructive power, what exactly were we stalemating? Nobody wants a nuclear war. The only thing mankind can do with a nuclear war is lose it and the cockroaches inherit this ball of dirt."

"That is retirement self-pity and out of character."

"Maybe, but it's unsettling and depressing to think your life's work was meaningless, amounting to nothing more than the playing of a silly game for possibly otherwise unemployable grownups."

Axtell swung around and aimed a forefinger to emphasize a rejoinder that died on his thin lips. His mouth snapped shut, his hand dropped onto the desk. After a deep breath he said, "What are your plans?"

Canterbury considered his answer for a moment. "First, travel some. God knows I did enough in my work, but now to places I've never been. I want to visit New Zealand and watch a little kiwi bird lay an egg bigger than a breadbox. Maybe the South Pacific, the Caribbean. Tropical places with no snow or cold. Than perhaps I'll come home and write my memoir."

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"I thought that was exclusively a mandatory British intelligence retirees subculture."

"Don't fret. It's not my style to kiss and tell."

"I know." Axtell stood up and came around the desk. Canterbury pushed himself up out of the chair, and the two men shook hands awkwardly. Axtell said, "Keep in touch. If you're around for lunch or dinner, call me. I'll be glad to see you."

"Likewise," Canterbury said, not really meaning it. He was at the door when Axtell said his name. He turned, his hand on the doorknob.

Axtell had memorized the script. "Something big has happened, Chris. You're out now and I shouldn't tell you, but I believe you deserve to know after all your years in the game. A going away present to gladden your heart. Top secret, you understand."

Canterbury nodded.

"The real reason we met here tonight is that I just came in from The Farm. We have a top level Russian defector out there."

"Who?" Canterbury asked quietly.

"Vasily Rosnikov."

Canterbury jerked, the doorknob rattling beneath his hand. He stood like a statue for a moment, scarcely seeming to breathe. At last he gave a slight shake of his head and said, "Rosnikov. Good lord, what a coup. When did he come over?"

"Two days ago, and already he's cooperating beautifully. It's coming along nicely."

"Why did he come? What was his reason?"

"He's a man who all his life dreamed one dream and fought to make it come true, to see *Rodina,* the Motherland, the most powerful nation on earth. Then overnight it became a fragmented country, the Commonwealth of Independent States. Eleven separate states searching for a democracy the entire world knows will never work. Rosnikov is a disillusioned old man. He's bitter, and this is his revenge against those who destroyed his dream."

Canterbury smiled. "What a prize if he tells it all. He was their main man in Europe for twenty-five years."

"We'll get it all, but so far he's making us work, and I can tell he's taking perverse pleasure in doing so. We'll take what he offers and then drop magic powder in his borscht and get the rest. He has one fact we want more than any other, and so far he's only teased us with it, told us about his method of payment to his most important mole. Bank accounts in places such as Nice,

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Ostend, Bonn, Liverpool. That's the how. In his own good time, or ours, he'll reveal the who. That will be jackpot time."

"I envy you being in on this," Canterbury said, his face revealing nothing. He opened the door. "Rosnikov is just about the biggest tame Russian you could hope for. Keep the faith, John." He left.

I've kept the faith for over twenty-five years, Axtell thought as he went behind the desk and reached under the edge to turn off the tape recorder. Have you kept the faith, Chris? Axtell went to the window and gazed down on Constitution Avenue. The babysitters would pick up Canterbury as soon as he left the building and stay with him twenty-four hours a day. The telephone taps were in place. Axtell wondered whether Canterbury would be the one to try to run to cover. He thought not and hoped not.

The following afternoon, Friday, Axtell borrowed a chair from another office, and now Wallace, Thayer, and Porten, the other senior European field agents, were seated across from their boss in the special office.

The three waited patiently while Axtell shuffled papers on the desk. It was Porten who finally broke the silence. Porten was tall and chubby, with the round, kindly face of a saint, and he could kill with either hand with the quickness of a mongoose. "John," he said softly, "are you going to brief us on why we were all called home? I was this close to buying that Chinese. Had him in my pocket."

Axtell stopped stalling and leaned back on his chair. "What brought you home is big." He recited the Rosnikov defection, the Nice and Ostend banks, the how, the magic powder, the who speech.

Pat Thayer shook her head, a frown twisting her pretty face. "This is crazy. There hasn't been a whisper in Europe. The Russians should be screaming kidnapping all over the media, but there's been nothing. What's going on?"

"They don't know where he is yet," Axtell said. "The new regime is being careful, especially in light of the financial aid they want from us."

The usually taciturn Wallace, short and rail thin, said, "That aid is bogus. They should let us brief Congress about the poor needy Russians."

"Why did he defect?" Porten asked.

Axtell gave them the disillusioned old warrior part of the script. "So that's it. Once Rosnikov runs out of breath, there

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will be work for all of you over there. Mopping up. We can expect cooperation from all the friendly governments. The mole, whichever country's service is involved, will simply disappear. No more scandals. So, for now you're booked into the Brickskeller Inn. Nothing should happen until next week, so enjoy at Company expense. Take in some nightlife, whatever pleases you, but check for messages at least twice a day. Now go and wallow in the perks while they last."

The three agents filed out of the office, and Axtell turned off the tape recorder. He stared at the closed door. Was it one of them? He had a disquieting thought and dismissed it. No, more than one was unthinkable. He reached for the telephone to doublecheck that the babysitters and taps were in place. The instrument rang as he touched it. He answered with a terse "Yes?," and as he listened his face turned a mottled crimson, his body tensing. Canterbury was apparently making a move.

A week passed, and the following Thursday Stuart Daniels was once again seated on the admiral's sofa. His host was slowly pacing back and forth over the length of the room.

Daniels said, "I brought yesterday's reports from the watchers, but they read the same as all the others. You heard the tapes?"

The admiral grunted an affirmative, then laughed like someone walking on autumn leaves. "I would have paid top dollar for a ticket to see you all puckered up and gloating with self-satisfaction last Friday when Canterbury packed a bag, rented a car, and headed south by southeast. What did you imagine, Florida and then Cuba?" The leaves crackled again.

Daniels' reply was a deep blush.

"So he drove to Charlottesville, Virginia. I could have told you his brother teaches at the university there. They did what any two brothers might do who hadn't seen each other in three or four years, including getting smashed Saturday night in a topless bar. Then Sunday evening Canterbury drove back, returned the car, and settled in. Stuart, your disappointment must have been monumental."

The director looked everywhere but at the admiral.

"Since then, he's been making travel arrangements to Australia, New Zealand, and Jamaica, all to begin in five or six weeks. Not exactly the ac-

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tions of a frightened man expecting to be exposed any day as a double agent."

"You've made your point, admiral."

"And the same for the other three. Not a false move among them. Have you read all the watchers' reports?"

"Of course."

"That Thayer woman has titanic stamina. She does nothing but party and seems to thrive on three hours' sleep now and then. She must be awesome in the field."

"One of the best ever."

The admiral dropped onto his chair, hands clasped between his knees. His gaze was intent. "If you're convinced your four superspies are clean, it's time to call Paris and put Sam Shields in motion."

"Right. Is the actor in place?"

"He arrived yesterday. His name is Tomlin, and he's well known on Broadway for his character roles with accents. I coached him. His Russian accent is perfect, and he knows what to say and what not to say. Sam will tape."

"I don't think Axtell will ask to speak to Rosnikov."

"But he might, and if I'm right, Axtell might just incriminate himself from this end."

Daniels' opinion of that remark was a decisive shaking of his head.

*

Late the following morning John Axtell rushed into Daniels' office unannounced, leaving a startled and speechless secretary in his wake.

Daniels looked up from the file on his desk and calmly said, "Morning, John."

"My God, you won't believe it." Axtell thrust a telex form at Daniels. It was a standard one-time pad message to Axtell, decipher yourself. Daniels glanced at the message, hoping he had achieved the desired picture of innocence. "So Sam Shields wants you to call him on the scrambled line. Not unusual."

Axtell sat down. "I called. Stuart, it's Rosnikov. He actually *is* defecting. He walked in on Sam and announced he wants to come over to us."

Daniels slowly rose to his feet, trying to look suitably astonished. "Is this a joke?"

"I spoke to Rosnikov. It's true. Everything we told the agents is coming true."

"This is . . . what did he say?"

"Simply that he wants to defect to us and are we interested, yes or no, because he has little time and he knows the British or French will gladly take him in."

Daniels made a thumbs up. "Of course you accepted."

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Axtell nodded. "I told him arrangements would be made immediately. Sam is standing by for details."

"All right!" Daniels said, smacking his palms together. "I'll get the 89th Military Airlift Wing to bring him over. They fly the president, and I want nothing less for this Russian. Wait in your office in case Sam wants to contact you again. I'll clear with the White House and call the flyboys. We'll use Orly."

Axtell strode out the door as Daniels reached for the telephone, not to call the White House or Andrews Air Force Base, but to verify the net around Axtell.

Six days later Thayer, Porten, Wallace, and Axtell were standing in Daniels' office glaring down at the director. The three agents were lined up in front of the desk while Axtell was off to the side, leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest. At the last minute Daniels had decided to invite Canterbury, but he was a no-show.

Daniels had explained the operation to them, and malevolent outrage burned in the eyes of Thayer, Wallace, and especially Axtell. Porten's expression was as bland and kindly as usual, but his lethal hands were twitching and Daniels watched them with some trepidation.

After a lengthy silence Daniels said, "We had no choice. You should understand we had to investigate the possibility and the way we did. I'm . . . I'm sorry."

Axtell pushed off the wall and silently left the office, slamming the door behind him. The agents waited in smoldering silence.

"That's all," Daniels said. "Stand by for now."

As the three agents turned to the door, it opened and Canterbury walked in. He smiled warmly at his former colleagues. "Hello. Sorry I'm late."

The agents filed past him without a glance, grim-faced and silent.

The door closed and Canterbury turned to Daniels. "That's a happy group. Let me guess. No raises this budget. Hi, Stuart. What's up?"

The following afternoon the admiral and Daniels stood facing each other in the living room in Arlington. Daniels was striving for calm to ensure that what he was about to say came out exactly right. The admiral, grinning, knew what was coming but decided to allow Daniels his moment.

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"Admiral, the unthinkable has happened. Rosnikov has actually defected. He's out at The Farm."

The admiral nodded, almost doing a dance step. "I know."

Daniels' jaw dropped. "You know?"

"It's in the Washington *Post* this morning."

"What?"

The admiral retrieved the newspaper from an end table and handed it to Daniels. The page three article was brief. Tass had reported from Moscow that Vasily Rosnikov, named as a deputy director in the Ministry of Economics, had disappeared, and foul play was feared.

Daniels quickly scanned the article and looked up, his befuddlement genuine. "I don't understand. I . . ."

"Don't worry, Stuart. The Russians are playing it cosy and cute, no doubt still concerned with that financial aid thing."

"Yes, but . . ."

"They're standing at our back door with a tin cup in their hand. They're in no position to get nasty. I think you'll have plenty of time to wring Rosnikov dry. Really."

Daniels could only shake his head in wonder at this improbable turn of events.

The admiral said, "Now you won't have to explain our maneuvering to your people."

Daniels visibly roused himself. "It's too late for that, and I made an unholy mess of it. It's bad."

"You'll work it out."

"I must go," Daniels mumbled and did.

The admiral watchers were parked a short distance down the road in the driveway of a vacant estate.

After a week of personal disaster at Langley, Daniels paid his last visit to the admiral. They were standing on the rear patio.

"I was just about to call you," the admiral said, obviously pleased to see his friend. "What's happening with the Russian? Did you nail down the mole? Tell me everything you can."

Daniels stared up at a gray sky promising rain and remained silent.

"Stuart, at least tell me about the mole. I deserve that."

Daniels lowered his head to face the admiral. He swallowed with difficulty. "Rosnikov didn't defect," he said softly.

"But you said . . . that story in the *Post.*"

"That newspaper article was the most unbelievable coinci-

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dence imaginable. Impossible but true."

"But you . . . why did . . ." Stunned comprehension invaded the admiral's face. He wheeled around and leaned his palms against the wall, like a man ordered by the police to assume the position. He stood like that for several minutes while Daniels fidgeted in quiet misery.

When the admiral pushed off the wall and turned around, his face was ruddy, his expression twisted. "Thirty-two years," he rasped. "Thirty-two years I gave my heart and soul to my country. And a few times pieces of my body. Twenty-seven years in Naval Intelligence, seven as director, and five years heading the Company. And you saw fit to take our operation a step further to include me. To even entertain that thought is obscene. You are obscene."

Daniels cleared his throat. "You yourself said when Axtell took over the field op desk the information flow seemed to increase fivefold. Your words. That was just when you came on board, too. I feel I was justified in covering the bases."

"If I were another kind of man, I would kill you where you stand. Get out of this house, and don't ever come back. I don't know you any more." Daniels started to speak, and the admiral roared, *"Get out!"*

Daniels walked to the side gate and turned back when the admiral called his name. "Where *is* Rosnikov?"

Daniels shook his head. "I don't know. Nobody knows, not even the Russians."

Vasily Rosnikov turned his back on the American and gazed out the open window at the bluegreen Caribbean. The afternoon breeze had freshened, and whitecaps flashed on and off as the sea neared land. Standing alone among the scattered palm trees at the edge of the beach, a banana tree heavy with fruit swayed in the wind, the bright green clusters hanging down like the hands of the giant on the labels of American vegetables Rosnikov now bought. He smiled with contentment. This place was everything he had thought and hoped it would be.

He turned around and leaned his ample backside against the windowsill. He had a short, thick body with no fat and a square, heavy-browed Slavic face. "Life is good," he said to the American, his smiling eyes reduced to slits.

The American raised his rum punch in a salute. "I'll drink to

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that, brother Vasily," he said and did just that.

Rosnikov joined him with pepper vodka.

The American, out of his primary-yellow fake beard, wig, and mustache, had short auburn hair and scattered freckles, giving him the appearance of a cornfed Midwesterner, a 4-H Club sponsor. He fooled a great many people.

The American spread his arms along the back of the wicker settee. "You said you were going to explain what you did to the CIA, what your leaving accomplished."

Rosnikov sat down. "Not so much my leaving, but the preparation for leaving." He slid the bottle of vodka out of the ice bucket and refilled his glass. "In the beginning I did not realize what would happen. I began to run my section as though I had an American mole working for me. That was to justify the monthly payments I began making to myself, the money you withdrew and placed in the Cayman Islands bank. Minus your percentage, of course."

The American nodded. "It's what I do. I accommodate."

"And you are American, which suited the fiction. So, I gave broad hints to my staff about an American double agent run only by me, knowing some of them could not resist telling others to demonstrate their importance. I told Salkin, the courier, that the payments were for an American mole and made certain he passed that information on to Grumadin, who took his place. All this for my masters in Moscow, to cover the monthly payments. And I used information as though it came from the mole."

"But there never was a mole?"

"Never. True, I had people over those years. For three years we bought the senior code clerk in the CIA Paris office until one night he got drunk and walked in front of a bus. For another two years I had a secretary in their Berlin office with access to a copy machine, but she married an embassy person and they transferred to Iceland. And there were many others. I treated all the information as coming from my imaginary mole."

"And the payments went on and on. Beautiful."

"Yes. Fifteen years ago I decided I deserved better at retirement than a dacha in a dreary Moscow suburb, a barely adequate pension, and the Order of Lenin First Class, which is worth nothing when you want to buy vodka. But then surprising events began to happen. The Americans came to believe my trick also. Five

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times over the years their European operations were halted, paralyzed for many months, while they searched for the mole they were certain they had in their ranks. That was a wonderful bonus to my plan."

The American went to the bar and made another drink, then perched on a stool. "And now that you've disappeared?"

Rosnikov smiled again. "Yes, just so. One time, perhaps three years ago, my courier, Grumadin, was arrested in Hamburg. He prefers very young girls. He was brought back to Moscow, and I believe they were going to shoot him. At the time I thought I might use him and his terrible tastes, though I did not know how, so I arranged that he be let off with a warning. And when it was time to leave, I called a friendly French deputy, had Grumadin watched, and the deputy arranged for a certain club to be raided. I was almost certain Grumadin would defect rather than face his superiors. He did defect and of course told the CIA everything, including his monthly bank trips for a mole in their organization. The results were more than I hoped for."

"How do you know this?"

"I have long had someone friendly at Langley. Not a mole, no access to secrets, merely a person to keep me informed of the political climate, the current temper and temperament, who was climbing up the ladder and who was climbing down. It helped to have that information."

The American raised his glass. "You're a humdinger, Vasily."

"Thank you, I think. So, Grumadin told them about the payments, and the results were devastating. The director devised a plan to discover the mole and in the process caused great hate among his people. The usefulness of the three senior European field agents was destroyed, and they were transferred to desks. Axtell, who headed field operations on the Continent, perhaps hates the most. Daniels moved him to the Asian desk. Axtell does not have the temperament or subtlety to work Asia. The East will destroy him. And that means all new people in their European operations, which will make it ineffective for one or two years. Also, the rumor is that the American administration is most unhappy with the director, and he will soon be replaced. That is always a setback."

The American, whose only loyalty was to himself, chuckled.

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Rosnikov joined in the laughter. "And that is not all. There is another agent, Canterbury, and the best might be to come. Do you remember Diane Emery-Green?"

"To be sure. I think she is the only totally sensual Englishwoman I ever met."

"Yes. She is the friend who purchased this house for me and made all arrangements so I could move here without my name appearing on any documents. She lives on the next island over, St. Kitts. And that is where Canterbury retired."

"Ah so."

"Diane is a most persuasive woman, and she and Canterbury have become extremely close friends. She tells me the retired agent is still very much a man."

"Double ah so."

"America does not have an official secrets act, and this agent is as disillusioned as any of the others. Diane is trying to persuade him to write his memoirs. He was with the CIA thirty years or so, and if she succeeds, his book will be a, what do they say, time bomb?"

"Blockbuster. Do you think she can do it?"

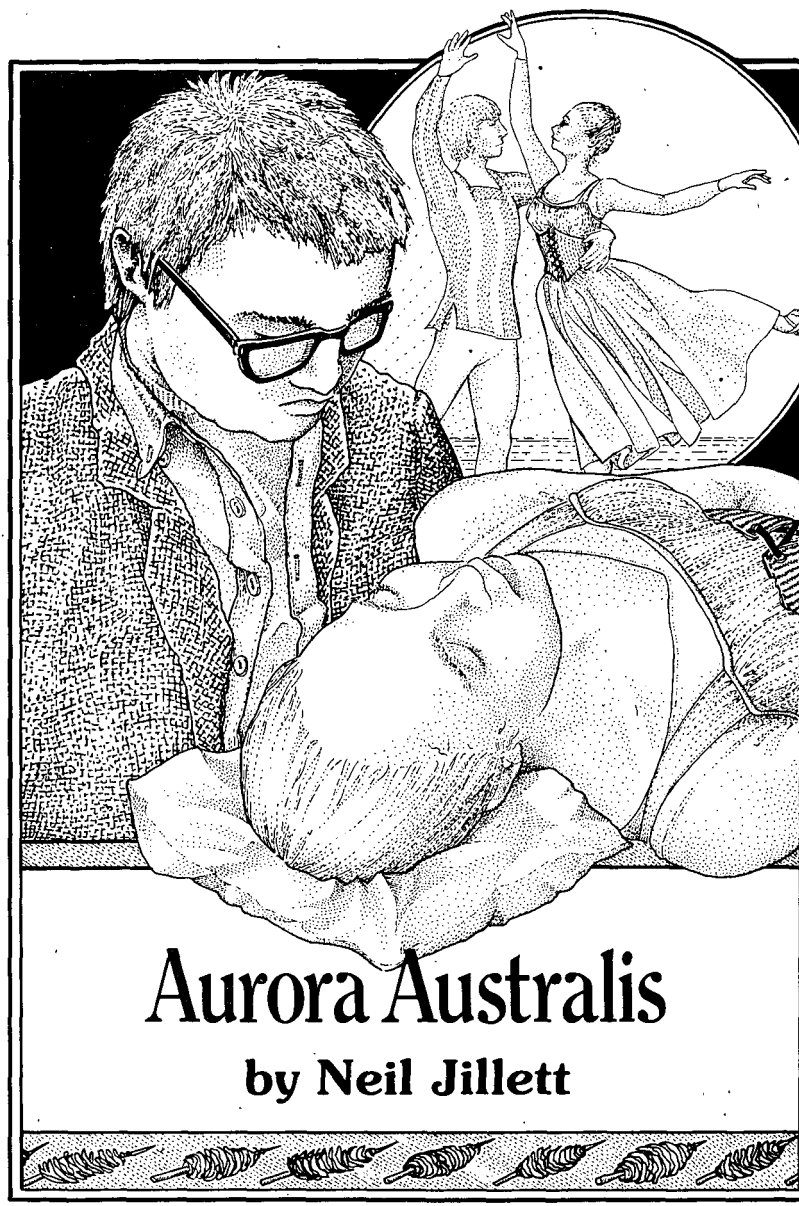
"If anyone can, it is she. As you said, a most sensual and charming woman. If she fails, so, I am satisfied with my parting shot. If she succeeds, then that will be the sour cream on the blintz. I believe that is an American metaphor."

The American giggled. "It's close enough for government work."

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FICTION



Aurora Australis

by Neil Jillett

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Dr. Estella Bianca, the only consultant of her kind listed in the Melbourne telephone directory, tried to look like the former British prime minister, Mrs. Thatcher.

"My appearance puts conservative people at ease," she told Eileen Ferguson and Gerald O'Brien, who had expected someone more colorful. She toyed with the floppy bow of her high-necked blouse. "It's a little trick I picked up when I was doing my master's degree in psychology, before I went on to a doctorate in more esoteric studies. But I also provide the comfort of the expected." She gestured to objects on a low table. "They're mainly for show—of course, people like you aren't fooled by window dressing." She gave a Thatcherish smile. "The problem's to do with your current production, I assume?"

"Mass murder seems to have been committed," Eileen said.

"But," Gerald put in, "unlike most crimes, perhaps this one can be undone."

Eileen frowned her colleague into silence. "We're hoping you can solve our problem, Dr. Bianca, before it becomes insoluble."

The consultant picked up a pack of cards from the table and shuffled them slowly. "Perhaps you should begin at the beginning."

Eileen Ferguson seemed fascinated by the pale, slim fingers moving against the garish cards. "I'm such a fidget," Dr. Bianca apologized. "This sometimes helps me to concentrate. But . . ." She made as if to put the cards aside.

"It's very relaxing," Eileen said. "Please don't stop, Dr. Bianca."

"Estella, please. I only use the title for making restaurant bookings and applying for an overdraft."

Something about this woman made the director of the National Ballet of Australia (NBA) feel soothed and reassured.

"It all began in February, Estella," Eileen said, "the day after our company returned from the States. . . ."

The girl pirouetted and leapt and floated around the studio. As if accustomed to her routine, the other students had stopped dancing. The boys watched admiringly. Most of the girls wore expressions of envy mixed with disbelief. No matter how hard they trained, no matter how inspired they might feel, they would never dance like this.

Good old star quality, Eileen Ferguson thought as she leant against the barre that jutted from the mirrored wall.

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She spotted passages from *Giselle, Swan Lake, The Nutcracker,* and several versions of *Romeo and Juliet,* all blended into one flowing performance. In ten years as artistic director of the NBA, she had never been blessed with a dancer so clearly born to rule the stage. In nearly thirty years of attending performances by the world's best companies, she had not seen anyone who could match this darting girl. Not in London, not in Leningrad, not in Paris—and not in New York, which she had just visited with the NBA during its first American tour in fifteen years.

The NBA and its school were in the same building, next to the Victorian Arts Centre, and shared studios. Eileen and the school's principal, Gerald O'Brien, cooperated in recruiting students from all over Australia; the best of them would graduate into the parent company at the end of the three year course. But this year, busy with the American tour, Eileen had left the auditioning to Gerald.

That February morning, the day after the company's return, he had walked into her office as she was catching up on two months' paperwork. He kissed her and said in one breath, "Hello, Eileen. Congratulations. Great reviews you got in New York. Can you spare a minute?"

Eileen waved a hand over her cluttered desk. "Can't it wait?"

But he pulled her from the room and, opening a door farther down the corridor, said, "This year's young hopefuls."

Twelve students were bending and stretching at the barres, checking themselves in the mirrors, keeping time with the Chopin being pounded out on a piano.

"Watch this." Gerald turned to the students. "Fine, kids. Now do your own thing for a few minutes."

The youngsters bounced into jivey routines and spins and jumps, but only one really took off. The others moved back to the walls and watched.

"School's been in for nearly three weeks now," Gerald said. "And every morning she's turned on this sort of act, always slightly different though I don't think she's out to show she's better than everyone else."

He clapped his hands. The girl twirled to a standstill. For the first time, she seemed to be aware, even a little embarrassed, that she had been dancing alone. She's either very naive or a wonderful actress, Eileen thought.

"Back to the barre, all of you," Gerald said. "And no fudging those *ronds de jambe* while I'm gone."

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In Eileen's office he perched on a corner of the desk while she poured coffee from a pot warming on a filing cabinet.

"Where on earth did you find her?" she asked.

"On a cattle property near Goondiwindi." When Eileen looked puzzled—ill-fitting false teeth sometimes slurred his words—Gerald repeated, "Goondiwindi, a one-horse place about two hundred miles west of Brisbane."

"She must have had a marvelous teacher."

"Far from it." Gerald mentioned a woman notorious for her destruction of talent. "*My* little discovery used to fly down to Brissy once a month for 'lessons' with her."

"Lucky she didn't make the trip more often. But how did she learn to dance like that?"

"Self-taught."

"Pull the other one."

"I can hardly believe it myself. She just loves to dance. And not just the usual Isadora Duncan wafting-about that kids on their own go in for, though she's no slouch at that, either."

"But her technique!"

"She watched videos of all the great ballets and copied what she saw. And usually improved on it, if you ask me. Any trouble working it out, she'd read books to tell how it was done."

"Is there anything she can't do?"

"When you're an only child living on an isolated cattle property, balletic boys aren't in big supply. So she's got a bit to learn about partnering. But I've given her a trial *pas de deux* or two personally." At forty-two Gerald, who had been a principal dancer in the NBA, was still in good shape. "If I could shed a few years, I'd kill to partner her through any full-length classic tomorrow."

"How old is she?"

"Fifteen."

"Exactly?" Eileen insisted.

"Ah." Gerald knew where Eileen's thoughts were heading. "She turns sixteen on July thirtieth."

"July thirtieth. Aurora!"

"She's too young," Gerald said unconvincingly.

"She'll be exactly the right age."

"But she's not ready for *The Sleeping Beauty*."

"You just said she could do it tomorrow." Eileen paused, struck by another thought. "By the way, what's her name?"

"Shirlene—"

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"Ugh!"

"Belcher."

"Bleeeh! We'll have to change it."

"You're against that sort of thing, as a rule."

"The exception that proves it." Eileen looked out the window and across the Yarra River to the skyscrapers of Melbourne's business district. "It's an honored stage tradition. After all, Melba, Nellie Mitchell that was, took her name from this city. Ballerinas change their names, too. Peggy Hookham to Margot Fonteyn, Lillian Marks to Alicia Markova."

"And," said Gerald, "Deirdre Biggins, who became Fiona Somerset."

He flushed as he usually did whenever he mentioned the NBA's leading dancer. It reminded him of the embarrassment his dentures had caused, near the end of his stage career, by falling out at the most poetic moment of his *pas de deux* with Fiona in *Les Sylphides*.

Eileen had sweeter thoughts. The miraculous girl with the dreadful name was not so short that she looked cute or tall enough to overwhelm any partner she might be given. Her limbs were in perfect proportion to her torso. Her breasts had a rounded softness that was not inconveniently voluptuous. Her small head sat elegantly on her slender neck. On stage, her pretty face, artfully made up, would become beautiful.

"Aurora, goddess of the dawn," Eileen said dreamily. "The dawn of a new age of dancing! Aurora Australis, the wonderful, mysterious light in the southern sky."

"Did someone mention Aurora?" Jeff Coles, the NBA's publicity manager, pushed at the half open door. A cigarette bobbed in his mouth. "Not fitness products?"

"Aurora, yes," Gerald said. "Fitness products, no."

"Oh, *Sleeping Beauty?"* When the others nodded, Jeff went on, "Bit of a coincidence. I've got a lunch with the people from Aurora Fitness Products today. They make everything from gym equipment and jogging shoes to wholegrain bread and soyabean sausages. Possible sponsors for *Beauty."*

"Nice idea," Gerald congratulated him. "Aurora subsidizing Aurora."

Jeff stubbed his cigarette in the saucer of Gerald's coffee cup. "Hope they don't expect me to eat seaweed and pumpkin seeds and wear a tracksuit." He lit another cigarette. He had begun smoking

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a few years ago, when a tobacco company was the National Ballet's biggest corporate sponsor. Now, though he sought more health-conscious sources of money, he could not give up cigarettes. "Aurora are very interested in us. The cult of physical fitness and all that." He coughed and looked sadly at the cigarette before stubbing it out in Eileen's saucer. "I've been dangling our dancers' vital young bodies in front of them. 'Good way to enhance your image,' I tell them. 'Goes well with muesli and nuts and dried fruit and dandelion tea.' "

"*Beauty's* hideously expensive to stage," Eileen warned, "so you'll need to hook them well before July thirtieth. And I may have just the right bait."

After Jeff had left, Eileen told Gerald, "Aurora Australis—it's way over the top. That's what makes it so right. I want Shirlene or Raelene or whatever she's called to become Aurora Australis before we start pushing her at the public."

"She mightn't want to."

"She'll do as she's told. Girls who want to be ballerinas always do." A week later Aurora Australis was taken out of the school and enrolled in the parent company. She proved to have stamina and determination, and she worked hard, without any displays of temperament. One day in April, Eileen led her into an empty studio where she could see herself from several angles in the mirrors.

"Look sad," Eileen commanded.

Aurora looked as if her pet kitten and her mother and father had just died.

"Look divinely happy."

Aurora's eyes sparkled as if the queen had just made her a dame of the British Empire.

"Look as if you're in love."

Aurora did what she thought was required.

Eileen was shocked. "I didn't mean quite like that."

Aurora softened her expression and stopped panting.

"Fine."

As Eileen named all the emotions she could think of, Aurora responded perfectly, in expression and gesture, every time.

Eileen sighed blissfully as she thought of the season in Sydney where *Giselle* was to have its opening night.

Aurora was a failure—because she was too good. As one of the Wilis, the ghostly maidens who rise from their graves and try to

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make Giselle's two-timing lover Albrecht dance until he drops dead, she drew and held the attention of everyone in the audience. Fiona Somerset, who danced the title role, wept for an hour afterward, furious that she had been upstaged by a girl in the back row of the corps.

With happy malice, Gerald O'Brien remembered how, during that disastrous *Sylphides,* Fiona had, with a finesse that made it look accidental, kicked his dentures around the stage.

"Roll on, July thirtieth and *Sleeping Beauty,*" he said to Eileen.

Executives of Aurora Fitness Products were given lunch in the boardroom at the National Ballet. Eileen, having ascertained that, though publicly fervent vegetarians, they enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh in private, laid on Tasmanian salmon and poached breast of chicken.

She told her guests how *The Sleeping Beauty* could be used to promote Aurora Fitness Products. "Our dancers keep their bodies in tiptop, and completely *natural,* condition." There had been rumors that Aurora Fitness Products might sponsor cyclists and footballers. "Our dancers never have to take *that* test."

Gerald O'Brien, looking at his glass, wondered if it had been a good idea to serve a wine of such an evocative color. But Aurora's managing director sipped happily at the chardonnay and said, "Some 'drugs,' of course, taken in moderation, can be quite beneficial to mind and body."

The deal was signed over camomile tea—the Aurora people did have strong views about coffee.

The lavish new production had been intended as a showcase for Fiona Somerset. At thirty-nine and slightly past her peak, she was still a favorite with audiences. But with the discovery of Aurora Australis, Eileen decided that all performances in the title role of *The Sleeping Beauty* must go to her newest ballerina.

"I have the most wonderful idea," Eileen told her oldest ballerina. "Carabosse."

Fiona's reply was a howl of rage: "But it's a mime role, hardly any dancing!"

"But a chance to be so dramatic."

Fiona tried tears, although she knew they would get her nowhere.

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Aurora blazed through rehearsals, making *The Sleeping Beauty* look so fresh that it might have been choreographed for her on the spot instead of in St. Petersburg in January, 1890.

Jeff Coles, in charge of publicity, ensured that everyone in Melbourne knew a star was about to appear and on her sixteenth birthday—shining more brightly than any dancer had ever done. But apart from the few performances in the corps of *Giselle,* Aurora was kept from view. The combination of publicity and secrecy worked. All seats for the gala premiere in the State Theatre and most of those for subsequent performances were sold in advance.

Aurora's parents, down from Goondiwindi, were allowed backstage briefly before the opening performance. Eileen warned them not to wish their daughter good luck.

The program had a photograph of Aurora and Michael Bannister, her Prince Florimund, in costume, on the cover. Inside, there was another photograph of Aurora in jogging gear, surrounded by a garland of nuts, dried fruit, and soyabean sausages and the words "Aurora—the birth of a star and the dawn of a new health age."

In the opening scene of *The Sleeping Beauty,* Princess Aurora appears only as a doll masquerading as a baby at a party to celebrate her christening. The wicked fairy Carabosse arrives unexpectedly, furious that she has not been invited, and pronounces a curse. On her sixteenth birthday the princess will fatally prick her finger. The Lilac Fairy diminishes the curse, promising that if she is pricked Aurora will not die, but fall asleep, to be awakened one hundred years later by a prince's kiss.

The next scene is Aurora's sixteenth birthday party. Carabosse, in disguise, gives her a spindle. Aurora pricks her finger and apparently dies. The Lilac Fairy, having ordered that Aurora be placed on a couch, says the whole royal court will sleep for a hundred years until the kissing prince arrives.

Aurora Australis's performance in this act made the audience stand and cheer. It was five minutes before the dancers could get back to Tchaikovsky's music.

As the red velvet curtain came down on the slumbering court, Eileen and Gerald left their seats in the stalls and hurried backstage, where they found stillness and a puzzled muttering instead of the usual buzz and bustle.

"They won't wake up," the stage manager grumbled.

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Eileen looked at the nineteen slumped bodies. She moved to touch Aurora, wanting to hug her for her brilliance but tempted to smack her for playing a practical joke at such a time. Gerald held her back. "Don't touch anyone. There's something seriously wrong here. I'll get old TH."

The chairman of the NBA's board, Nigel Tavistock-Haverbrack, who was also Melbourne's leading neurologist, allowed himself to be separated from the champagne in the V.I.P. reception area, then examined the sleepers.

"I've no idea what it is," he said, shocked into an honest opinion. "If it's catalepsy, it's not in a form I'm familiar with."

"Food poisoning?" Gerald suggested.

"I'd say not."

Fiona Somerset ran on stage, her long hair flying wildly, as if she were playing the mad scene in *Giselle*.

"I killed her!" she screamed. "I wished her dead. I pricked her finger."

"My dear young woman," said Nigel Tavistock-Haverbrack, automatically writing Fiona a prescription for a sedative, "that would hardly account for all these other comatose people. Though, come to think of it, this could be a case of sympathetic mass hysteria. Lucky the whole company, all sixty dancers, weren't on stage when it happened."

The audience was sent home (with the promise of a refund on tickets). When the police arrived, Fiona confessed that she had inserted a real needle into the spindle but denied having put poison on it. The needle and a speck of blood from Aurora's finger were sent for examination. No poison was found. Other lines of investigation were equally futile.

Meanwhile, on Nigel Tavistock-Haverbrack's advice, the sleepers, with blankets over their bodies and pillows under their heads, were left where they were until more could be discovered about their condition.

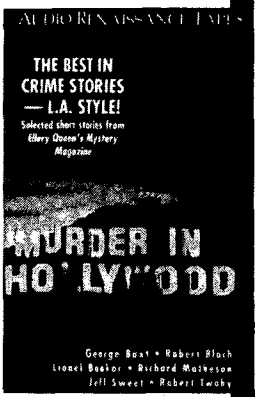
Eileen and Gerald, side by side, with their backs against Aurora's couch, also spent the night on the stage, but were kept awake by the snoring.

In the morning other medical specialists could offer no more enlightenment. The police had no clues. Aurora Fitness Products sent a message of sympathy and withdrew its sponsorship. Aurora's parents, hardened by rabbit plagues, fluctuating commodity prices, and other rural disasters, concealed their grief but threat-

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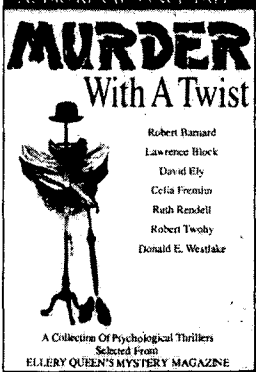
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ened to sue the National Ballet of Australia for millions for unspecified injuries to their daughter and damage to her career.

Twenty-four hours later Eileen, back in her position beside Aurora's couch, asked for the hundredth time, "What on earth are we to do?"

"Go on with Act Two and hope the prince wakes her with a kiss," Gerald suggested.

Eileen shook her head. "I keep thinking of Fiona screaming that the curse was real." She gave a nervous laugh, feeling stupid for even considering that the debacle might have a supernatural cause. "If this is witchcraft, I don't want to go any further, not into the next act, without professional advice."

"A white witch, you mean? A genuine Lilac Fairy—or a bleached version of her—to counter our black witch, Carabosse?"

"It's all I can think of."

"But where do you find a witch, white or black?"

"The yellow pages of the phone book," said Eileen, "could be a good place to start."

Estella Bianca gave the tarot cards a last, slow shuffle and said, "You're wise to consider an occult explanation, but have you been through all the rational possibilities? Hypnosis, for instance?"

"They've all been ruled out," Gerald said, "including the Aurora Fitness Products people's worry about rumors, spread by business rivals, that our dancers are the victims of beyond-use-by-date Naproayog Logs." When Estella looked puzzled he explained, "One of Aurora's bestselling products. Nutritious health bars made of nuts, dried apricots, and compressed oatmeal, topped with candied yogurt. Delicious!" He ran his tongue reminiscently around his dentures. "Though the nuts can be a nuisance."

"No particular food or drink," Eileen said, "was taken by all the people who fell asleep."

"It must be supernatural then," Estella said, gazing into a crystal ball (strictly for show). "I'm afraid I can't help you directly, since I'm a charlatan." She paused theatrically before adding, "But my grandmother may have the necessary skills."

"How?" Eileen asked, on the verge of despairing tears.

"God and Satan made a pact, or treaty," Estella explained. "Satan said he'd create black witches, prime doers of evil, seventh daughters descended from grandmothers who'd also been seventh daughters. He threw in a few more numerical permutations, know-

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ing mathematics weren't God's strong suit."

"As Einstein, Stephen Hawking, and a few other blokes have discovered," Gerald said.

"But God, though not as mathematically wily as Satan, played it safe. He created white witches—prime doers of good—also the seventh daughters of mothers whose mothers had been seventh daughters."

"It sounds terribly complicated," Eileen said.

"Indeed," Estella said, giving a Thatcherish smile as she patted her stiff cloud of chestnut hair. "But the main point is that few witches, white or black, know they're witches—although circumstances can sometimes conspire . . ."

"I remember Fiona Somerset mentioning there'd always been a lot of girls in her family," Gerald said. "And she's got some Rumanian—or is it Hungarian?—ancestry."

"Central Europe's always been a catchment area for witches," Estella said.

"So how can your grandmother help us?" Eileen asked.

"She's a white witch, unlike me. Too many boys in my generation, so the powers passed me by." Estella smiled enigmatically, as if unwilling to indicate whether this was a good or a bad thing. "I don't want to raise your hopes too high, since Grandmama's never done much more than the odd spot of frustrating the evil eye."

Gerald, becoming restive, said, "But we should seek her help right away."

"She lives in Western Australia and hates flying—and would, I'm sure, refuse to use even a broomstick, if that particular legend had even the slightest foundation in myth. So it will take a few days to get her here, if she's agreeable." When Eileen and Gerald looked glum, Estella added, "Your sleepers have survived so far. Being out of it for a few more days shouldn't do them any harm."

The old woman, who did not speak English, arrived five days later. She inspected the sleepers and, through her granddaughter, questioned Fiona Somerset, who had rarely stopped weeping since the opening night of *The Sleeping Beauty*. She also spoke to Penny Bright, who had danced the role of the Lilac Fairy.

"Grandmama's certain the sleepers are under a curse," Estella said. "She's established that Fiona Somerset is a black witch, the seventh daughter of a woman whose mother was also a seventh

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daughter. But don't be too hard on her. She'd heard all that seventh daughter stuff but didn't believe it. She had no genuine conviction that she could do harm."

"Then how," Eileen asked, "did she manage—"

"She was very jealous of Aurora, understandably. When, as Carabosse, she pronounced the curse, she did so with unusual, if unintentional, force."

"Can the curse be lifted?" Gerald asked.

"Penny Bright, as the Lilac Fairy, provided what I'll loosely term a counter-curse. She's not the seventh daughter, but she must have done something right. Otherwise, Aurora would be dead, not just asleep. I take it Penny's a very serious, well-intentioned young woman?"

Eileen nodded.

"That sort of personality helps, according to Grandmama. It's possibly got something to do with the imponderables that God and Satan put into their treaty."

"So, if she continues thinking the right thoughts, Penny should be able to wake everyone up?" Eileen asked.

"If other forces work with her. The divine connotations, for instance, Aurora being the ancient Roman goddess of the dawn. Consider, too, the coincidence that it was Aurora Australis's sixteenth birthday as well as the sixteenth birthday of Princess Aurora. Then there's the magic of the theater. You must know how powerful that can be. Critics are always going on about it, usually to regret its absence. Nor should we forget that Aurora's parents disturbed the atmosphere on that unlucky night by wishing her luck."

"Against my advice," Eileen said.

"Grandmama hopes she can work through Penny," Estella continued. "There are cases—not fully documented, more matters of oral tradition—where such transference has been attempted, with varying results. Grandmama's counting on the general magical associations I've just mentioned to make it work. The attempt to lift the curse would take place in circumstances as close as possible to those in which it was imposed."

Jeff Coles, the publicity man, was pleased by this decree. Three days after Aurora and the others had failed to wake up, *The Sleeping Beauty* season had been canceled, and all ticket money had been refunded. With the withdrawal of Aurora Fitness Products' sponsorship, the NBA was facing a huge loss. Jeff predicted that the white-magic rerun, at greatly inflated prices, would be sold out

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to people who wanted to witness the lifting of the only authenticated curse in the history of Australian ballet.

The Sleeping Beauty's first act, in which Aurora and the members of the court doze off, is followed by an act in two parts—"The Vision" (the Lilac Fairy tells handsome young Prince Florimund of the princess's plight) and "The Awakening" (the prince, after a magical journey, bestows the reviving kiss).

After Penny Bright and Michael Bannister had performed "The Vision," the backcloth went up to reveal the sleeping cast, ready for "The Awakening."

"My God," Gerald said to Eileen, "we've forgotten something."

Horrified that he might be too late, he rushed onstage as Michael Bannister approached Aurora Australis.

"Stop!" Gerald shouted.

Michael turned just as his lips were about to brush Aurora's. Estella and her grandmother let fly some Italian obscenities. The curtain came down.

"What's the meaning of this?" Estella demanded.

"Look at the costumes," Gerald said.

Estella looked. "So?"

"Aurora went to sleep in the seventeenth century. Michael's dressed in the costume of the eighteenth. If he'd kissed her, she and the others might have waked up one hundred years later—which is actually more than two hundred years ago. They'd have died, crumbling into dust, as soon as they opened their eyes."

"You've saved us from a tragic error," Estella said. After conferring with her grandmother, she announced, "Prince Florimund should change into twentieth century clothes."

These turned out to be high-heeled boots, jeans, a green silk shirt, a leather jacket, and a Crocodile Dundee hat.

"The time thing could still be tricky," Estella warned, "but Grandmama's set Penny Bright to thinking positive thoughts about having put Aurora to sleep for three hundred forty years, not just a hundred. Theoretically, that should make her wake up today instead of in the middle of the eighteenth century."

"The Vision" and part of "The Awakening" were repeated. Michael, feeling ridiculous onstage in the clothes that drew such admiring glances on the street, kissed Aurora Australis. She did not stir.

"I don't know what's wrong," Estella complained.

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"Of course!" said Eileen after they had all mused through a long silence. "The prince has to be really in love with Aurora. Michael's not in love with her because he's in love with someone else."

"Who?" Estella asked.

"Is that relevant?" Eileen was not one to spread gossip.

"The Bluebird," Gerald said.

"Which one is she?" Estella asked, looking around the stage.

"*He's* in his dressing room, getting into costume and makeup for Act Three, if we ever get that far."

Estella passed this information on to her grandmother, who said something nasty in Sicilian dialect.

"How about Frank?" Gerald suggested.

Frank Walsh was a competent dancer who would never move out of the junior ranks, but he was goodlooking, well-built, and reputedly had great sex appeal and a greater enthusiasm for exercising it.

"We could try him, I suppose," Eileen said.

"The Vision" and "The Awakening" were repeated after Frank Walsh, who was wearing his Puss-in-Boots costume in readiness for the fancy dress wedding party in Act Three, had changed into street clothes. Aurora did not respond to his kiss, though he gave it more passion and saliva that was customary in ballet.

After a few words with her grandmother and Frank, Estella announced, "It's pure lust with him. What we need is pure love."

Three more dancers tested their kisses on Aurora, again without effect. It was well after midnight. As the audience booed and slow-clapped, the attempt to revive the sleepers was temporarily abandoned.

"So we need a man who's in love with Aurora, with a deep, true, pure love," Estella said. "But where do we find him?"

"She's never been out with a boy," said Aurora's mother. "She led a very sheltered life in Goondiwindi."

"We'll have to advertise," said Jeff Coles, the publicity expert. "The media will help. It's a great story. Front pages and primetime telly all over the world."

By noon the next day twelve thousand five hundred and seventy-eight males, aged from eleven to eighty-nine, had applied to wake the Sleeping Beauty. Those below fifteen and over thirty were declared ineligible. Estella and a volunteer group of psychologists and psychiatrists reduced the rest to forty-five possible contenders. Estella's grandmother made the final choice—Darren Blavnik.

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"She's got to be kidding," Eileen complained. "He couldn't pass for Prince Charming with a girl who was deaf, blind, and had no sense of smell or touch."

Darren Blavnik was a nineteen-year-old garbage collector. He was short and podgy, wore thick-lensed glasses, had acne and a squeaky voice, looked musty, and smelt sour.

"But he's a virgin," said Estella. "Grandmama says that's an inestimable qualification. He's never been on a date or kissed a girl. And he's head over heels in love with Aurora. He wants to save her, then spend the rest of his life worshipping her."

So, a fortnight after Aurora had fallen asleep, it was Darren's turn to try to rouse her.

Penny Bright, the Lilac Fairy, led him to the Sleeping Beauty. He bent over, shy about kissing her, especially in front of an audience of two thousand people who had paid so much for their seats in the State Theatre that the National Ballet of Australia could do without corporate sponsors for the next two years. But love and a prod in the backside from the Lilac Fairy conquered all. Darren licked his lips and applied them tentatively to Aurora's.

He felt a gentle response from her warm, soft mouth. He saw her eyelids tremble. A movement, no more than a delicious shiver, ran through her body. She wrinkled her nose. The other sleepers stirred. Aurora opened her eyes. Darren's sallow, spotty face was very close to hers.

"Yuck!" said Aurora, and closed her eyes again—but only for a few seconds.

Aurora Australis did not dance her way to stardom.

After she had been awakened by Darren, the National Ballet of Australia immediately went on to perform *The Sleeping Beauty's* Act Three, in which Princess Aurora is married to Prince Florimund. But Aurora walked through it, since Eileen was worried that vigorous dancing could damage muscles made slack by the big sleep.

By the time she should have been ready to dance again, Aurora had, for reasons that doctors could not explain, put on weight. By the standards of other girls her age, she was not fat, but she no longer had the right shape or the inclination to be a dancer, although she still wanted to be a performer.

She was hired for a leading role in Australia's most popular soap opera, *En Suite,* an endless saga of suburban triumphs and

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frustrations. At the insistence of its producers, who did not think Aurora Australis was a suitable name for an actress playing the-girl-next-door, she again became Shirlene Belcher.

She found that she quite liked Darren Blavnik after all. And when she had persuaded him to wash more often, his devotion was impossible to resist. They were married on her seventeenth birthday. The ceremony was nationally televised, and the young couple appeared on the cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly* and *Time's* Pacific edition.

Fiona Somerset, relieved by the lifting of the curse she had imposed and freed of the strain of competing with Aurora for the limelight, made a great return to form. Her many appearances as Princess Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty* were praised by the critics and rapturously received by audiences throughout Australia and in several other countries.

She woke up every time she was kissed by the prince, whoever he was.

(continued from page 2)

page 135): " 'Bob'—whose real name was Robert Haines, though I should think he must have forgotten the fact, so seldom was he addressed by it—was Tress's servant. He had been an old soldier, and had accompanied his master when he left the service. He was as depraved a character as Tress himself. I am not sure even that he was not worse than his master. I shall never forget how he once behaved toward myself. He actually had the assurance to accuse me of attempting to steal the Wardour Street relic which Tress fondly deludes himself was once the property of Sir Walter Raleigh. The truth is that I had slipped it with my handkerchief into my pocket in a fit of absence of mind. A man who could accuse *me* of such a thing would be guilty of anything. . . .

"He is a great hulking fellow who is always on the grin."

And now you know all that we do about it. Of course, if anyone has any clues to the authorship of these stories, we'd be glad to hear about it.

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FICTION

Blood Feud

by Ray Davidson



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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"Herringbone" Tweede felt distinctly uncomfortable. In the first place, he felt like an intruder. Family gatherings—they called them "reunions" here in Zion—should, he felt, consist of family, and he was not, never had been, and never would be a Johnson. Johnsons, by and large, whether male or female, were big people, heavy about the middle and the face. Johnson males tended to dress in cowboy boots, Levi's, and western shirts. (How old Levi Strauss must writhe at this common usage of his name as a generic, Tweede thought.) Their belts had large, ornate buckles holding up their stomachs, and they must have been uncommonly uncomfortable in those cases where the stomachs refused to be held up but drooped heavily over the belts. Johnsons talked about farming, ranching, horses, and the past—endlessly. And Johnsons seemed obsessed with who was cousin or nephew or aunt or great-great-grandson of whom.

In the second place, Tweede was uncertain about the menu. They called it potluck. The luck tended to run largely to a variety of potato salads, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Jell-O with pieces of canned fruit embedded in it, another Jell-O creation mixed with whipped cream and shreds of carrots, something called sloppy joes—impossible to eat without dribbling gobs of ground beef drenched in a pungent tomato sauce down the front of one's shirt—and a number of different kinds of chocolate cake. Drink was uniformly one or another of the many canned sodas available at any supermarket or corner grocery.

In the third place, mingled with the genuine friendliness and the hearty welcome, there was a faint undercurrent of something else. It was certainly not directed at him, the outsider. Perhaps that was why he sensed it so keenly. Everyone else seemed to take it in stride. What was it? He couldn't put his finger on it. Unease? Yes, but . . . hostility? Perhaps.

Off in the corner of the pavilion, which was surrounded by an acre or so of open park dotted here and there with rather antiquated, rusty playground equipment, one of the older male Johnsons was holding forth in the midst of a small group, evoking laughter and nodding heads. At the same time, off in the opposite corner, surrounded by a similar group, sat another of the Johnsons, the oldest of all, Tweede thought, spinning yarns and

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chuckling. Did the tension arise between the two groups, flowing across the picnic tables littered with scraps of tablecloth, covered dishes, paper plates and cups, plastic knives, forks, and spoons, and large open binders revealing genealogy charts and family group sheets detailing the birth, marriage, death, and other dates of the individuals chronicled?

Genealogy seemed to be a passion with Mormons, Tweede noted. As there were a great number of babies being carried about by young mothers or having their diapers changed on adjacent tables, it seemed evident that the Johnson genealogy was being abundantly replenished. And over, around, and beneath the tables, substantiating that fact, swarmed a continuous stream of youngsters, racing about, snatching bits of food, arguing, laughing, calling, crying, fighting over the use of the playground equipment, or in a few cases, sitting on the benches staring wide-eyed at the other children and at Tweede as though astonished that such creatures could possibly exist and afraid of what it might mean for the future of civilization as they knew it.

"Come and meet Great-uncle Joe," a friendly voice said into Tweede's ear, and Griffith Johnson, his host, took an arm and began towing him toward the group surrounding the oldest Johnson. Tweede allowed himself to be towed, nimbly sidestepping one of the younger Johnsons—it was in fact a young Miller, but Tweede wasn't up on all the ramifications of the family—who raced by, oblivious of this relatively insignificant impediment to its progress.

As they approached the group, the old man's voice rose into audibility. "Jesse ain't nothin' but a plain fool and a damned fool at that," it enunciated with remarkable clarity and edge. "He ain't had a brain in his head since he was born, an' he hain't got one now. He went and sold the homestead without even a by-your-leave, an' Mama, she had to fend for herself. If it wasn't for me and Jenny . . . it's a wonder to me they didn't haul him up in front of the bishop and have a court on him, an' it would've served him right."

"On second thought," Tweede's host murmured, veering aside, "let's go meet Great-uncle Jesse. Uncle Joe's getting pretty old." This non sequitur left Tweede blinking, but he obligingly followed his host around the end of a table, once again sidestepping the same young Johnson (Miller) still en-

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gaged upon its furious quest, and down the opposite side of the pavilion toward the other group. A burst of somewhat nervous laughter exploded as they approached, and hard upon its dying, Tweede could hear a rather nasal drawl say, "... and that old goat never would let him near him again. Ran like a scared rabbit every time he came in sight. You wouldn't think the old goat had the sense, but he did. Fact is, that was the first time that old goat showed any sense at all. Kind of surprised a number of people. I guess Joe learned a lesson that time. Probably the *only* time since Mama spanked him for swiping apples off the Neiburs' trees 'cross the road. And then most likely it was old Mr. Neibur put the fear of God into him. Mama hadn't got the spunk. A thievin' sort was Joe. Still is. . . ."

Tweede's host had stopped short, still holding Tweede's arm, so Tweede had stopped, too. "Every year I tell myself I won't come next year," his host said. "And every year . . . sorry, Herringbone."

A voice raised at the center of the pavilion precluded Tweede's reply. "All right, everybody," a big and very positive woman was shouting, "here's what we're going to do. First we all eat, then afterwards we've got a program, so *don't go home as soon as you've finished eating.*" Was it Tweede's imagination or did the consequences of such disobedience hover ominously in the shadows of the pavilion roof for a moment before dissipating? "Now Cousin Martin Miller, Henrietta's husband, is going to give the blessing on the food because he's a bishop and we're real proud of him. Go ahead, Martin."

The blessing pronounced, Tweede followed his host to a table, sidestepping various young Johnsons and Millers and others determined to get there first, picked up a paper plate, and rather hesitantly surveyed the choices available. And so the afternoon wore on. As it happened, he never did meet Joe or Jesse Johnson.

"Look, it's been nearly six months. You don't have to apologize. It wasn't that bad. I enjoyed it," Tweede expostulated, realizing as he said it that his words were in fact giving him the lie. He felt himself turning slightly red.

Grif Johnson grinned. "I can tell," he said. Then he sobered again. "We're all used to family reunions, I guess. I can see

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how a non-Mormon . . . Anyway . . . "

He didn't finish but let his eyes wander about the small second floor office from his place on the Deseret Industries sofa.

Tweede, half standing against and half sitting on the front edge of his desk, smiled back. "You aren't very familiar with non-Mormons, are you?" he said. "When I was a kid and the family got together, you could sometimes cut the tensions with a knife. Your reunion was interesting, and I kind of liked your family." Tweede meant it, and Johnson could hear that in his voice. "So don't keep apologizing. You'll make me start thinking there's really something wrong with them."

Grif shot him a startled glance, then looked down at the pointed toes of his boots stretched out at the end of his long legs. "Maybe there is," he said.

"Hold on." Tweede straightened, circled around, and sat in the creaky chair behind the desk. It protested loudly, and Tweede frowned. The Three-in-One hadn't lasted very long. He wondered what would, but the thought was fleeting. "What's happened?" he asked.

After a couple of false starts and embarrassed pauses, Grif Johnson told him.

"You remember the house Joe was talking about? It belonged to Joe's and Jesse's father, my great-grandfather's brother. Joe married first and built a place a few miles up the road toward Bear Lake. When their father died, Jesse got the old house, him still being single. Their mother was getting along and for a while she and Jesse lived in it, but Jesse kept wanting to sell the place, so finally they quarreled and she went to stay with Joe and his family, and Jesse sold the house and the land it sat on. The two brothers have been feuding ever since.

"It wouldn't have been so bad, maybe, but after a year or two, the buyers decided they didn't care for the location and put it up for sale again. And Joe bought it. That put the gasoline on the blaze for sure. Jesse claimed Joe bought it to spite him. Their mother died about that time, and the house stood empty for a year while they fought about it. Jesse wanted to buy it back from Joe, and Joe wouldn't sell. Then the town grew out toward them some, and Jesse got an offer for the rest of the land, which he still owned. He sold it and with the proceeds made Joe an offer Joe couldn't turn down without looking like the original dog in the manger. So Jesse got the

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house back and went to living in it with his wife—he'd married in the meantime. His wife died there a few years later. Their one son was killed in Vietnam.

"A month ago, the house burned down—clear to the ground. They found Jesse—what was left of him—in the cellar among the debris. You can imagine the talk that started. Half the town began wondering just where Joe was when the fire started. Things looked pretty bad for Joe for a time. He and Jesse . . . well, you heard them. But the sheriff never could prove the fire was set. They had in some arson expert from Salt Lake who decided it was faulty wiring. Finally, they closed the book on it. But there's still a lot of talk. I don't think there'll be a reunion next year. It's split the family bad."

Tweede frowned. "Why," he asked gently, "are you telling me all this?"

Johnson looked up and met Tweede's gaze, his eyes troubled. "I . . . I don't know," he said. "Come down to it, I don't see . . . it's hell for Joe. He hasn't shown any signs of having more money to spend than usual, but . . . " Abruptly, he stood. "I don't know what I thought you could do," he said. "I guess I had some halfbaked idea you might be able to prove something, and since I was downtown anyway . . . Sorry, Herringbone. I'm always apologizing to you for something, aren't I?" He turned toward the door.

"Why money?" Tweede asked, alerted. This was something he understood.

Johnson paused, hand on the doorknob. "Jesse kept all his money in the house," he said. "Claimed he wasn't going to get stuck like the suckers that put it into failed S and L's and shaky banks. It made Hyrum Engles furious, but it was Jesse's money, and I guess he could do what he wanted with it. Hy's the manager of the local First Security branch."

"They must have found the safe or strongbox or whatever he kept it in," Tweede said.

Johnson tightened his lips, then shook his head. "Nope. Nothing like that in the ruins, the sheriff said. But when the arson expert's report came in . . . well, they closed the case. Not enough evidence to justify continuing the investigation."

"So you want me to investigate?" Tweede asked, frowning.

Johnson shook his head. "No. What's to investigate? Like I said, Joe's shown no signs of having any extra money, and heaven knows he could use

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some. Forget it. It's just a story. I've got to run. I've got an appointment at the bank myself, at two. Going to enlarge the store if they'll let me. See you around."

Tweede thought of the thriving television and appliance repair shop in the Murray neighborhood where they both lived and smiled.

"Hope they do."

"Want to come to a dance at the Stake Center?" Johnson asked casually, hand still on the doorknob.

Tweede shook his head. "Don't dance. Sorry." He liked Grif Johnson, and it took a kind of stony agility to dodge the many invitations the man extended to become familiar with the Church and attend its services and social events. He was not always successful. Fortunately, Grif didn't press—just kept coming up with something else.

When Grif Johnson had gone, Tweede sat for a while frowning to himself and turning over the events the man had related. A month ago! Faulty wiring! On the other hand, missing money! Of course, it could have gone up with the rest of the house. Probably had, but . . . He walked to the window and gazed out at the new Delta Center where the Utah Jazz were due to play that night. He could see a back portion of it through the gap left by an empty lot in the line of buildings around the corner. Randolph wasn't that far away, actually. And it was fall. The canyon color was spectacular, or so he had heard. He shrugged. Not much doing at the moment.

Money. Would Jesse Johnson have kept his under a mattress or in a shoebox? Even the brief incident Tweede had witnessed had left him with the impression of a shrewder man than that. Eccentric, yes, but a lot of the Johnsons and Millers and other assorted families he had met that day had sported one or two eccentric types—not stupid, just wrapped up in their own constrained worlds without an awful lot of exposure to the bigger one outside.

And how had the house managed to burn to the ground? Surely someone must have noticed and called the fire department. On the other hand, did Randolph have a fire department? Just how far out of town was the old Johnson homestead?

Tweede turned and picked up the phone.

"Randolph?" Lieutenant Brady asked when Tweede had made his request. "What's going on up in Randolph?"

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"Probably nothing," Tweede said. "But there was this fire and a man died in it, relative of a friend of mine. I understand the case is officially closed. I just wondered if you knew anyone in the sheriff's department in that county."

There was a pause while Brady thought it over. Then: "I see. And you think . . . "

"I don't think anything," Tweede protested. "I'm just curious."

"This friend hire you to look into it?"

"No. He thought of it, but . . . never mind, Brady. I was just curious, I guess."

"Oh, I don't mind putting in a word for you," Brady said. "Whether they'll cooperate is up to them. Look, when you get up there, ask for Deputy Willard. He and I grew up together in Ogden."

"I don't know that I'm going up there," Tweede objected.

"No? I'll give Willard a call. I guess I owe you one after that Langham business. Just keep it clean."

The rattle of the handset being replaced came over the wire before Tweede could protest further. He replaced his own handset and smiled. Now he was committed in spite of himself, and he wasn't sure but what that hadn't been the whole idea from the beginning.

The fall colors in the canyon had been beautiful. He'd gone over Monte Cristo pass out of Huntsville, and Ogden Canyon really had been something. But Randolph was as he had remembered it—a spread-out collection of houses, buildings, and barns straddling State Highway 16 intermingled with fenced fields dotted with cows and horses in the midst of a broad, flat valley.

"Yes, Brady called," a tall, thin Deputy Willard said. "You know, you're a real curiosity, Mr. Tweede. A private investigator, no less. I don't think most of the folks in Rich County would know one if they stumbled over him. But Brady vouched for you, and that's enough for me. Brady and me, we go back a long way."

"So he said. I came through Ogden," Tweede said.

"Ah! Monte Cristo. Nice drive this time of year. Well, Mr. Tweede, what can I do for you?"

Tweede told him. "Understand, Grif Johnson didn't hire me," he concluded. "On the other hand, I think he would have if he thought there was anything to find out. According to him, the family is torn up about it."

"That's for sure," Willard said. "Well, there's no further

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investigation going on, and none planned. We got an anonymous letter accusing Joe Johnson of deliberately setting the fire, but that was just spite, I expect. With the expert's report . . . well, officially, it was an accident. But try to tell some of these hardheaded Johnsons that."

A kind of small shiver traveled Tweede's spine. "Anonymous letter?" he said. "Could you trace it?"

"It was postmarked here in Randolph, but there was nothing more we could tell. A lot of local spite has been generated by the brothers' feud. I doubt there's anything we didn't cover, but if you want to look around, I sure don't mind just so long as you don't rile things up further."

"Thank you," Tweede said. "Could you tell me how to get to the scene of the fire?"

"I can do better than that. Come on. I'll take you there. It's a bit out of town, but some out of state fellows have a scheme going to build out that way, so I don't guess it'll be that far away for very long."

"How come the house burned clear to the ground?" Tweede asked. "No one gave an alarm?"

"Oh, there was an alarm given, all right. Old Ms. Peabody lives just across the road with her son. He wasn't much good, but she phoned in the alarm. Trouble was, the place was a tinderbox. Old, you know. And dry. And the fire started in the middle of the house—junction box in the basement, the arson expert said. Got a head start before anyone could see much of it from outside. By the time the fire boys got there, there wasn't that much left. All they could do was let it collapse on itself and burn itself out. Luckily, there wasn't much danger of its spreading. Nothing to spread to. Now, you just follow my van. It's only about a mile and a half from here."

Tweede followed the deputy's van north out of town along Highway 16, then swung off the highway onto a small side road, blinking in the dust raised by the van. Fortunately, it wasn't far. In a matter of a quarter mile, they turned again through a sagging gate in a wire fence and pulled to a stop on a lawn that was considerably past being a lawn any more.

"Only a month?" Tweede asked, gesturing at the tangle of weeds.

" 'Fraid old Jesse Johnson wasn't much on keeping up appearances," Willard replied. "There's what's left of the house."

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They approached the blackened, crumbled foundation and peered down into the basement excavation, filled now with ashes, charred timbers, tangled wiring, and skeletal plumbing pipes twisted into odd angles and melted into unpipelike shapes in places. A toilet bowl was barely recognizable among the debris; near it was a mound that had Tweede wondering what on earth it could be when suddenly he realized he was looking at a bathtub upside down. At one end, the bricks of the back wall of a fireplace and chimney still tottered upright, but perilously. "Huh! That could be dangerous," Willard said, and gave the structure a little push. Wearily, the whole thing collapsed into the excavation to lie atop the front half of the old fireplace, which had fallen into the rubble below when the floor gave way. The dust settled slowly over the rest of the debris, which gave the impression of having been stirred by some giant spoon, the pieces left where they ended up. There was no order to it at all.

"Where was he found?" Tweede asked.

Willard pointed to the side of the bathtub. "About right there. As it happened, it was me that found him. Doubled up, almost in a fetal position, mostly bone covered with roasted flesh. It was a hot fire. The hands were nothing but a splay of bones—one foot, too. Body was a little better preserved. Not exactly the way old Jesse would have wanted to die, I guess. But it was Jesse, all right. Had one foot under the tub still wearing his shoe."

"You had trouble finding him?"

"No trouble, no. Actually, that early on, I was just poking around, not looking for anything in particular. He was covered by some of the debris. Couple of charred beams and a lot of rubble across him, probably from the roof."

"And under him?"

"Under him? Nothing much. Kind of lying on the cement."

"He was in the basement, then, when the fire caught him."

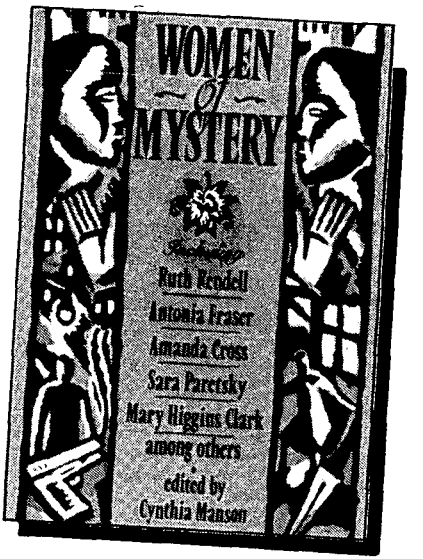
Willard glanced at the smaller man beside him, a speculative light in his eye. "Hadn't thought about it," he said. "Looks that way, though, doesn't it? Maybe he was wakened by the smoke and went down to investigate. It's the sort of fool thing he'd do."

Tweede nodded. "How," he wondered, "could the expert from Salt Lake make anything out of all this?"

"You can read his report if you'd like," Willard replied.

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"Something about melted wiring and arc flashes on the junction box. Anyway, Chief Howard—that's the fire chief—had warned Jesse about that wiring a number of times. Threatened to condemn the place if he didn't do something to bring it up to the minimum standard. Jesse finally promised he would, but he hadn't got around to it yet, worse luck. Chief said the place was an accident waiting to happen."

"And you found no strongbox or safe or anything like that?"

Willard grinned. "That's the way you're thinking, is it? I've had my suspicions, too. Jesse sure wasn't poor, just tight as a woodtick, but he wouldn't use a bank. And there was a lot of folk around who knew that."

"Including Joe Johnson?"

"Oh yes, but he wasn't the only one. Between you and me, I've wondered about Sid Peabody. Here's a fellow thirty years old, doesn't work, lives at home with his mother doing for him, bone lazy. Still, why burn the place down? That's no way to steal money."

"And yet, no strongbox."

"Nope. No strongbox. No safe. No sign of anything like money, not even coins."

"I'm surprised you closed the case."

"Who said it was closed? I said there was no investigation going on now and none planned. Nothing to go on. But still there's a few things unexplained, like that money. 'No current investigation' doesn't mean the matter is closed."

Tweede might have replied to this, but a voice pulled them both sharply about. A heavyset man with slicked-back hair, wearing, for a change, a pair of slacks and a polo shirt, stood at the gate some fifteen yards away watching them, the late afternoon sun glistening on his shiny hair. "Still not satisfied, Willard?" he called. "Seems like you'd be giving up by now."

Willard surveyed him sourly. "What's it to you, Sid?" he asked, starting back across the weeds toward the gate.

"Ain't nothin' to me," the man replied, straightening.

Watching, Tweede saw the door of the house across the road open and a tall, straight, brisk woman emerge and stride rapidly down the path to the road. "Sidney," she called. "Sidney, don't you go buttin' into the sheriff's business. I need those potatoes dug right now."

"Shut up, Ma," Sid replied with casual insolence. "I'm not buttin' in. Just watchin'."

"And what about those potatoes?" the woman challenged, her color high as she crossed the road.

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"I'll get them when I'm ready," Sid said shortly. "Stop buggin' me."

Her face painfully flushed, the woman stopped in the middle of the road and looked anxiously toward Deputy Willard. "If he's botherin' you, deputy . . . " she said.

"No, ma'am. Not to speak of. Sid don't bother me. You need some potatoes dug?" He put his hand on the gatepost and started to move past the pudgy Sidney.

"I'm gettin' 'em. I'm gettin' 'em," Sid spat. "She don't need you to dig 'em for her—not when I'm around."

"I'm glad to hear it, Sid," Willard said.

With a sullen curl of lip, Sid turned and lumbered back across the road toward the corner of the house and disappeared.

"He's not very polite, but he's harmless," the woman said to Willard. "I guess I didn't raise him too well." She glanced at Tweede and away again. "Are you . . . are you still investigating that fire? I thought they'd decided it was an accident."

"Insurance, Ms. Peabody," Willard said smoothly, to Tweede's astonishment. "Mr. Tweede here is looking into it for the insurance people, so I brought him out to see for himself."

"Insurance?" the woman said. "I didn't know . . . but Jesse Johnson always was sharp."

Just why the sheriff's deputy was giving him this opening, Tweede couldn't tell, but he couldn't very well make a liar out of him before a member of his own community. Smiling, he turned to the woman and said, "You're Mrs. Peabody? The one who phoned in the fire alarm?"

"Ms. Peabody," she corrected him. "Warren Peabody left me with nothing, and I am no longer married to him. Yes, I phoned in the alarm. I woke up about two thirty in the morning—I don't know what woke me, but there was a red light flickering on the wall of my bedroom. Perhaps that was it. When I got to the window, the flames were already shooting up above the roof. Then Sid knocked at my door and said, 'There's a fire at Jesse Johnson's, Mother,' and I said, 'We'd better phone the fire department.' Sid said it was too late to do anything about it, but I phoned anyway. When they got here, the place was already starting to fall in. Poor Jesse."

"Did Sid say how he knew about the fire?" Tweede asked, and the woman stiffened and stared down her nose at him as though he were some species of

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unpleasant beetle. "He was awakened the same as I was," she said. "Our rooms both face the front." She turned to the deputy. "Why can't you just let it go?" she asked. "It was an accident. It must have been an accident."

"We have let it go, Ms. Peabody," Willard replied. "I told you: this is an insurance matter. Mr. Tweede has to file a report with the insurance company. Insurance companies make their own investigations."

"Did you see anybody about the Johnson house that day?" Tweede asked.

"Nobody." She set her lips, then opened them grudgingly again. "Only Jesse Johnson, coming and going in that old truck of his."

"There must have been others traveling the road," Tweede said.

"Nobody that hadn't a right to," she snapped. "And few of those. There aren't many living farther out than we do. Not this direction. There hadn't been anyone about for a week or more that doesn't belong here."

"What do you mean?" Willard asked. "You saw some stranger about here before?"

She sniffed. "A vagrant. We used to call them hoboes. You don't see them any more—not usually. It surprised me. It could have been an itinerant farm laborer that got lost somehow. Or an Indian. He started to come here, but Sid shouted at him and he went away. That was over a week before—ten days more likely."

"Oh, him!" Willard laughed. "He was seen in town, too. Fact is, we held him overnight in the jail—more to give him a place to sleep than anything. You're right. He was an old itinerant Latino. He left town at least a week before the fire."

"Could he have come back?" Tweede asked. "Would he have known about Jesse Johnson's money?"

"Not likely."

"Anyway, what has a vagrant got to do with the accident?" Ms. Peabody asked. "For that's what it was, an accident. Chief Howard warned Jesse about that wiring. If there's insurance coming, that's what it was, an accident."

"I wonder who gets the insurance?" Willard asked Tweede, his mouth tilted in a sly little smile.

"I'm not at liberty to give out that information," Tweede replied, affecting his best dignity.

"It wouldn't be his boy," Ms. Peabody said. "He'd outlived Bob. In fact . . . oh, my! In fact, his closest living kin is Joe Johnson."

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"I don't suppose you saw Joe Johnson about that day or in the evening, did you?" Willard asked sharply.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, the woman shook her head. "No. No sign of Joe. He doesn't ever come here any more. But if there's insurance . . . "

"Now, don't you go stirring up trouble for Joe, Ms. Peabody," Willard said. "Let things be. You just forget this conversation."

She stared at him angrily, then turned on her heel and strode back across the road.

"What's eatin' her?" Willard wondered aloud.

"I think," Tweede said, "she's not too sure of her son."

"You think she knows something?"

Tweede shook his head. "I don't think so. I think she's afraid there's something more she doesn't know."

"You know, I didn't follow up much on this insurance business, but I knew there was some. And it's true: Joe Johnson would be the one to benefit. I believe he inherits what interest there is in Jesse's estate."

"Tell me more about this anonymous letter," Tweede said.

"Come back to my office and I'll show it to you," Willard offered.

"Done," Tweede said and headed for the Aspen.

There was literally nothing distinctive about the letter except, as Willard had said, that it was postmarked in Randolph. But anyone wanting to give an anonymous tip would have had to mail it. Randolph was that sort of town. Tweede thanked Willard for his help.

"Tell Brady hello for me," Willard said. "It's been an experience working with a private investigator, though to tell you the truth, Tweede, you don't seem like the type to me."

"You've been reading Dashiell Hammett," Tweede said, smiling.

"Who?" Willard asked. "Never heard of him."

"Never mind," Tweede said, suppressing a small sigh. "Thanks again."

The Aspen was low on gas, so Tweede stopped at the local Phillips 66 before heading back south on State 16. He had had no intention of pursuing further queries, but the station attendant, a young fellow in the inevitable jeans and cowboy shirt, though wearing canvas sneakers rather than cowboy boots, came out and watched while Tweede ran gas into the car's tank, and Tweede found himself engaged in small talk

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as the old-style pump pinged the gallons.

"Just passing through?" the boy asked.

"On my way back to Salt Lake," Tweede said.

"Saw you with the sheriff's deputy," the boy said.

"I know a friend of his in the city." Something prompted him to ask, "Do you ever get transients through these parts?"

The boy looked puzzled. "Transients?"

"Migrants. The sort that used to be called hoboes," Tweede explained.

The boy shook his head. "Nope. Once in a while, an old cowboy type comes through heading for Idaho or Montana, usually in a pickup. Occasionally a Mexican or Latino going up to the potato farms in Idaho. Sheriff sent one off about a month ago. Indians sometimes."

"Yes, Deputy Willard told me about the Latino," Tweede said, one eye on the pump dial.

"Didn't do any good. The fellow was back again in a couple of weeks."

Tweede let go of the pump nozzle and the pump whined. "Back again?" he asked.

The boy shrugged. "Saw him out on the road trying to pick up a ride one day three weeks ago or so. Haven't seen him since. You done there? That'll be eighteen forty-six. You gonna put it on a card or pay cash?"

"What? Oh! Cash. Which way was he trying to go?"

"Off that way," the boy said, pointing south as Tweede handed him a twenty. The boy dug into a pocket and pulled out a handful of coins and bills and counted four pennies, two quarters, and a dollar bill back into Tweede's hand.

"Thanks," Tweede said. "The next time you see Mr. Willard, tell him about seeing the vagrant. I think he'd be interested."

The boy looked at him in astonishment. "Why?" he asked.

Tweede merely smiled and climbed in behind the wheel of the Aspen. Heading south, he felt the little shiver again. He didn't turn off on 89 toward Huntsville and Ogden. And he didn't bother inquiring at Woodruff. The place was smaller than Randolph—and only ten miles away. Instead, he continued southeast on 16 across the state line to Evanston, Wyoming.

Tweede was not licensed in Wyoming, and the size of the town dismayed him. He drove about, noting the locations of the banks and businesses. He had already seen the Wyoming Downs racecourse on his way into town, wondered about it,

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and decided it had no place in his puzzle. Finally he drove out to the interstate junction and headed back toward Salt Lake City. It was quite late when he got home.

To say that Lieutenant Brady was unenthusiastic about Tweede's story would be putting it mildly.

"It's pure conjecture from start to finish," he objected.

"On the other hand," Tweede countered, "if I'm right, murder has probably been done. And the money is certainly gone."

"That's a big 'if,'" Brady growled.

Tweede shrugged. "I can't prove it, of course. I haven't the resources."

Brady thought about it. "We can check the banks for new accounts, but that's about all we can do, and I'm not sure how we can justify that if it comes to it. This isn't Rich County, and it sure isn't Wyoming."

Tweede nodded. "I'd hoped you'd at least try that. I think you might hit paydirt."

Three days later, Brady was on the phone to Tweede. "Willard up to Randolph wants to talk to you," he said.

"You found something?" Tweede asked.

"Just what you figured," Brady said, ungrudging respect in his tone. "A tidy sum, too. I don't know if you were just lucky or if you've started receiving revelations."

Tweede laughed. "No revelations . . . at least, I don't think so," he said, remembering the little shiver.

The drive to Randolph went faster than before. He'd already admired the scenery, and though the colors were still gorgeous, he could concentrate on his driving. The Aspen pulled her weight, with a little puffing, over the Monte Cristo pass and coasted down to Birch Creek and the junction with 16. He was about to turn left past the gas station/country store on the corner when he saw an old pickup turn into the station lot and park off to one side. A somewhat shabby, dark-faced older man with a luxuriant Mexican-type mustache climbed down from the truck, crossed the road, and started trudging northward along the shoulder towards Randolph. The truck had Wyoming plates—new Wyoming plates that gleamed against the mud-spattered, rusty metal of the pickup like diamonds against burlap. The shiver down Tweede's spine was full-fledged now.

With barely a pause, Tweede turned south towards Evanston and drove down the road until

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the junction had dropped from sight. Then he turned the Aspen around and pulled onto the shoulder near someone's front gate, pointing north, and reached for the mobile phone he had had installed in the car. There had been no traffic to speak of over the Monte Cristo pass. There was very little heading north out of Randolph. After his call, he waited five minutes, then, under the suspicious eye of the woman of the farmhouse, started up and drove north again.

The vagrant was still plodding along the shoulder. He turned hopefully as the Aspen came into hearing range. Tweede pulled over. "Lift?" he asked.

The man bared his blackened teeth in a tired grin. *"Gracias, señor,"* he said, his voice thin and whining, and clambered into the passenger seat. "Eet ees a long way for a poor man like me to walk. And the police, they are not sympathetic to one like me."

"No, I guess not," Tweede said. "Are you going far?"

"I am nearly there now," the old man said. "There ees work for me in the next town."

They drove into Randolph, and Tweede pulled up across the street from the county building. "This all right for you?" he asked.

The old man glanced at the official building with a troubled frown but nodded. *"Muchas gracias. Vaya con Dios, señor,"* he said, climbing out of the car. "Eet ees only a matter of a few blocks now. I am very grateful."

"Don't you have to register to work here?" Tweede asked. "You're a Mexican national, aren't you?"

"I have my permit," the man said.

Tweede shrugged and climbed out of the driver's seat. Already, the old man was trudging off away from the main road, his back to Tweede and the county building. Then the sheriff's van appeared around the corner of the next block and came slowly toward Tweede's car, the old man between them. The old man checked, glanced back at Tweede, then slouched still farther into his collar and moved on. But the van slowed and pulled across the road beside him, and Willard got out.

"Sorry, sir. I need to ask you a few questions," he said, and the old man straightened.

"Why, Jesse Johnson!" Willard exclaimed in well-simulated surprise. "What are you doing here when you're supposed to be dead? And how'd you get that muck on your face? And that bandido mustache?

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You look like Pancho Villa. Come to mail us another letter accusing Joe of doing you in?"

Tweede sat behind the desk in his second floor office on Third West and spoke softly.

"It was the Mexican vagrant they found in the remains of the fire," he said. "Probably dead already or perhaps dead drunk. Jesse won't say, and there's no hard evidence otherwise. He claims he didn't know the man was there, but that's nonsense. How else to explain the shoe? In fact, everything that happened afterwards hangs on his knowing. That's inference, as the defense attorney will point out. Juries are fallible, and he may beat the murder charge they're going to bring in. But there *was* insurance, a fairly sizable amount of life insurance. He had converted most of it into a loan to fix up the old homestead as the chief had been pushing him to do. The insurance company accepted the verdict of accident backed up by the arson expert's report, so they didn't proceed with an investigation of their own and had written it off as just one of those things. He had to do it that way. He couldn't figure out any other way to collect on his own death, you see. It was the old vagrant's bad luck that he came along when he did. Jesse knew some Spanish, and he knew he would have to play the part a while after the fire. He did it for the money and, I'm afraid, because he hated his brother. I'm sorry, Grif."

Griffith Johnson raised his head from his hands and lowered them to clutch his knees. "I guess," he said, "we'll live through it. I'm just sorry you had this kind of introduction to family reunions. I still don't see how you came to think it was Jesse's doing."

Tweede leaned back, and the chair accepted his changed position without protest. Good! The heavy duty machine oil seemed to be working. "I kept thinking of what the two of them had to say about each other in the pavilion that day," he explained. "Joe was angry, yes, but Jesse was vindictive. There was a malice in what Jesse said that I couldn't detect in Joe. Joe wanted justice done. Jesse wanted Joe damned. I could see Jesse murdering Joe. I couldn't see Joe murdering Jesse."

"And he put the money in a bank?" Grif asked, wondering. "Why? He was dead against banks."

"Not really. He just didn't want it known around town how much he had stashed

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away. And he couldn't just withdraw it all at once before setting the fire. I'm afraid he'd been planning something like this for a long time. It was the old vagrant that suggested to him how to go about it."

"We're not all like this, Herringbone," Grif said.

"We?"

"Us. The people of Utah. The Church. We're not . . . "

"Of course not." Tweede sat forward again. "I know that. Do you know why I moved to Salt Lake from Los Angeles?"

"You told me. To relax, you said. Los Angeles was getting . . . "

"And I'm still satisfied that I made the right move. Grif, is that invitation to the Stake dance still on?"

Grif smiled. "You don't dance," he said.

"No "

"But we have a Ward picnic coming up. In Hobble Creek Canyon south of here, out of Springville. You said you liked the scenery. The colors won't be quite at their peak, but . . . "

Tweede laughed aloud. "Done!" he said.

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED"

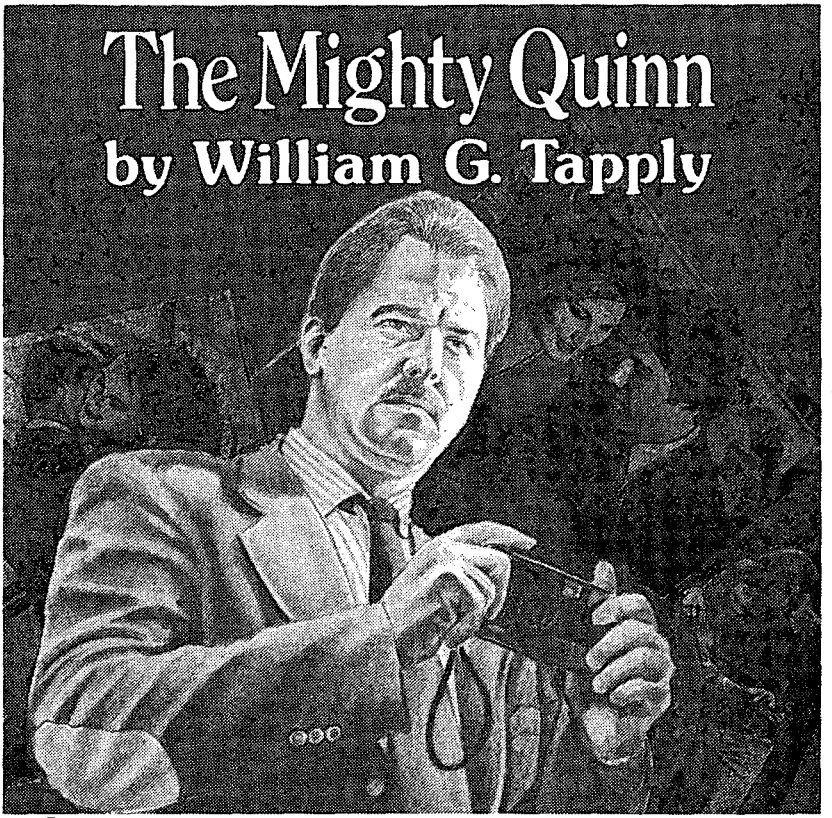
The clue was to take two left-hand turnings in succession, and then one right-hand turning, repeating the procedure till the right-hand door in the top wall was reached. The turnings are counted only when there is a choice of ways.

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FICTION

The Mighty Quinn

by William G. Tapply



Alice Wolforth wore her long hair in a braid down the middle of her back, and across the distance from my desk to my office doorway it looked blonde and she looked young and scared, like a teenager meeting her boyfriend's parents for the first time.

"Mr. Quinn?" she said haltingly.

"Come on in, Mrs. Wolforth," I said. I swept my hand toward the chair beside my desk.

She tried a quick smile. It failed. She gave me a little self-deprecating shrug and crossed the room. She was slim, tall, erect.

"Have a seat," I said. "Relax. Coffee or something?"

She shook her head. "No. No, thank you. Nothing."

Up close I saw that there was more gray than blonde in her

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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hair, and the skin over her high cheekbones and at the corner of her pale green eyes was cross-hatched with tiny lines. She hadn't been a teenager for quite a while. I pegged her in her mid-fifties.

I leaned back in my chair. "So," I said. "How can I help you?"

Her small teeth chewed on her bottom lip. She stared down at her hands, which were wrestling with each other in her lap. "I think this is a big fat mistake," she said softly.

"Could be," I said. "Hardly ever is, but it could be."

She looked up at me. "I guess I will have some coffee."

I got up and went to the Mr. Coffee machine in the corner. As I stood there with my back to her, pouring two mugs full, I said, "Your husband, is it?"

"I don't know. Yes."

I brought back our coffee. She took one of the mugs and held it in both of her hands. She lowered her face to it and sipped.

I laced my fingers behind my neck and waited.

"I feel so . . . disloyal," she murmured.

"But you feel like you've got to know."

She nodded. "Yes." A whisper.

"Not knowing," I said. "That's what's hard. And if you don't do it, you'll never know. You won't ever be happy again until you know."

She nodded.

"But you think it's sleazy, coming to a private investigator."

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

I waved my hand in the air. "It's okay. See, Mrs. Wolforth, I think of myself as a social worker. I try to help people with their problems. Now, your problem is not knowing about your husband. As long as you don't know, you're going to be unhappy. Well, my job is to make you happy. Okay?"

She peered up at me, her mouth still hovering at the rim of her coffee mug. "I can't stand not knowing any more," she said. "I hate suspecting him. He's—we've been married for thirty-one years."

"And this is the first time you've . . . "

She smiled quickly. "Oh, yes. It's been quite . . . we've got five grandchildren, Mr. Quinn. Thomas has always . . . Oh, that old idiot." She lowered her head and touched her fingers to her cheek, but not before I saw the tears well up in her eyes. She put the mug onto my desk. "I should go right now," she said.

"That's fine."

She stared at me for a moment, then picked up the mug

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again and took a sip. "No. I've got to know."

"You could ask him."

"But that would be like accusing him of lying, you see. He thinks I trust him. Trust has always been important to us. And if I did ask him—accuse him—and he denied it . . . do you see? I still wouldn't know. Because I guess I don't trust him. So I've got to . . . "

I shrugged. "It's up to you, Mrs. Wolforth."

"It's easy for you."

"Yes. Because I know in the long run you'll be happier."

"You've got women coming to you all the time, I guess. Needing to know."

"Men, too," I said. "About half of them are men."

"Let's do it, then. What do you need to know?"

"Why don't you just tell me about it."

Thomas Wolforth, she told me, sold insurance out of a two-man office in Concord. With the economy down and pressure coming at him from the home office, he'd started making sales calls in the evening. Not every night. Once or twice a week. He wouldn't get home until after she'd gone to bed. As if he was waiting for her to go to bed, she told me, so he wouldn't have to talk to her, to lie to her. After thirty years of marriage, she found she couldn't get to sleep without him beside her, so she always knew when he got back. It had been getting later and later.

"Why don't you believe him?" I said.

She shrugged. "I couldn't tell you why. But I know him. It's the way he looks at me sometimes. The way he snuggles against me when he comes home late. Touches my hair, kisses the back of my neck when I'm pretending to be asleep. If I said anything, it would be to ask him where he'd been, and I don't want to hear a lie so I pretend to be sleeping so I don't have to say anything to him."

He always called when he was going to be late. Alice Wolforth told me she'd let me know the next time it happened. She gave me an envelope with twenty five-dollar bills in it.

Thursday around four thirty Alice Wolforth called me. "He just called, Mr. Quinn. He told me not to wait up."

"Okay."

"Said he's got several calls to make. He's not telling the truth. I heard it in his voice."

"Well, we'll see," I said. I hung up, grabbed my jacket, and headed out.

She had told me that Thomas Wolforth drove a one-year-old

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gray Taurus wagon. She had given me the plate number. I found the car in the lot behind the office building in Concord center. I parked two rows from his car and took out the photo she had given me. Steel-gray hair combed straight back, high forehead, dark-rimmed glasses. He was fifty-eight, she had told me. About six feet tall, a little stoop-shouldered. In the photo he was smiling shyly into the camera. Alice Wolforth stood beside him with her cheek on his shoulder. She was smiling, too.

I spotted him walking toward his car around five thirty. He was carrying a briefcase. He unlocked the Taurus and put the briefcase on the back seat. Then he slid in, started up the car, and pulled out of the lot.

I let a few cars slip in between us and followed him out of town, onto the highway, and all the way to Cambridge. When he pulled into the parking garage under the Charles Hotel, I kept going. I circled the hotel three times before I went down into the garage. I found his Taurus and left my nondescript Chevy Citation several rows from his. I fished the little hand-sized Olympus 35-millimeter from the glove compartment. It was loaded with superhighspeed film that made useful pictures even in the subdued light of a fancy restaurant.

I took the elevator up to the lobby, glanced around, then climbed the wide stairway up to the lounge. I spotted Thomas Wolforth seated at a corner table sipping what looked like an old fashioned. There were plenty of empty places. I took a table that put me behind his shoulder where I could watch him without craning my neck.

I ordered a bottle of Heineken.

I saw her appear at the entry to the lounge, squint into the dim light, spot him, and wave. He lifted his hand about a foot off the table. She smiled, went to his table, and sat beside him. She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek.

I got that shot.

She was in her late twenties—about half Alice Wolforth's age. Pretty, if you like the elegant type. Tall, well-built, short black hair. She wore a narrow little navy blue skirt that rode halfway up her thigh when she sat. Under a yellow cardigan sweater was a bone-colored silk blouse unbuttoned far enough to show several gold chains at her throat. She could have been a secretary or a stockbroker or a lawyer, coming over directly from the office.

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The waitress brought her a glass of white wine. The brunette and Wolforth touched glasses. She scooched herself close beside him. I could see her hand snake up onto his leg. I got those shots, too.

After fifteen or twenty minutes she stood up, touched his mouth with her forefinger, and headed toward the ladies' room. Thomas Wolforth put some bills on the table. I did the same, got up, and left. I lurked outside the lounge until they came out. They walked past me and started up the stairway. She had her arm around his waist and her head resting against his shoulder. Their hips bumped as they climbed the stairs. I followed discreetly behind them, although I doubt if they were aware of anybody else in the world except each other.

I got it all on film. I also photographed them entering the room and leaving it two hours later.

Alice Wolforth called the next day. I told her I followed him as far as Cambridge but lost him in the Harvard Square traffic. She said she knew he had clients in Cambridge, but she didn't sound very convinced.

On Tuesday she called again. He was going to be late. I said I'd try to do better.

I got to the lounge before he did this time and was already sipping a beer when he came in. He ordered his old fashioned, and it was nearly a half hour before she came in.

This time she was a blonde, shorter, less flashy than the brunette, but equally elegant.

She drank white wine, too.

They used the same room upstairs.

I got all the photographs.

The next time it was a blonde again, but a different one.

I didn't bother taking any pictures.

When they came out of the lounge, I stepped forward and said, "Mr. Wolforth?"

He frowned at me. "Yes?"

"May I speak to you for a minute, sir?"

"Who are you?"

"The name's Quinn." I handed him my card. It reads, "Quinn: Discreet Investigations." Phone number. Simple and eloquent.

He glanced at it, glanced at me, glanced at the blonde.

"What do you want?"

I shrugged.

He stared at me for a minute. Then he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a room key. He handed it to the blonde. "Meet me up there," he told her.

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She took the key and went up the stairs. Wolforth watched her go, then turned to me. "Okay, Mr. Quinn. What is it?"

"Pretty nice," I said, jerking my head in the direction of the blonde.

He didn't say anything.

"I thought the brunette was the best-looking of the bunch, though," I said. "I'm partial to brunettes, myself."

"Look—"

"Consider me a social worker, Mr. Wolforth," I said. "People come to me with their problems, and I try to solve them. I like to see people happy. If I can make people happy, I figure I've done my job, and the world's a better place. Understand?"

He cocked his head and frowned at me.

I took out the photographs of the brunette and the first blonde and dealt him the one off the top. He squinted at it, then looked at me. I nodded.

We dickered a little, standing there outside the lounge. I settled for five grand cash for the negatives and prints. We also agreed to certain other considerations.

We met at the lounge at the Charles Hotel the next afternoon and completed the transaction. He was a gentleman the whole way. We shook hands when we parted. He even thanked me.

Alice Wolforth sat beside my desk and played with the snap of her purse.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Wolforth," I said. "I'm not going to drag this out."

"I knew it."

"No," I said. "Your husband is a good, honorable man."

She stared at me. "Really?"

I smiled. "Really."

"You mean—"

I nodded.

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "I'm so relieved. I can't thank you enough, Mr. Quinn."

I shrugged. "I'm glad it worked out this way."

It's been over a year now, and I'm still keeping an eye on Thomas Wolforth, giving him more than his five grand's worth. He's never gone back to the Charles Hotel—or any other hotel, for that matter. I didn't think he would. We have a deal, and he's an honorable man.

And I think he's happy about it. I know Mrs. Wolforth is. I am, too, for that matter. It worked out well. I like it when I can make people happy.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by J. K. Potter

Negative vibes. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "April Contest," and write your name and address on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

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FICTION

The Flower of Dibensit

by Dan Crawford

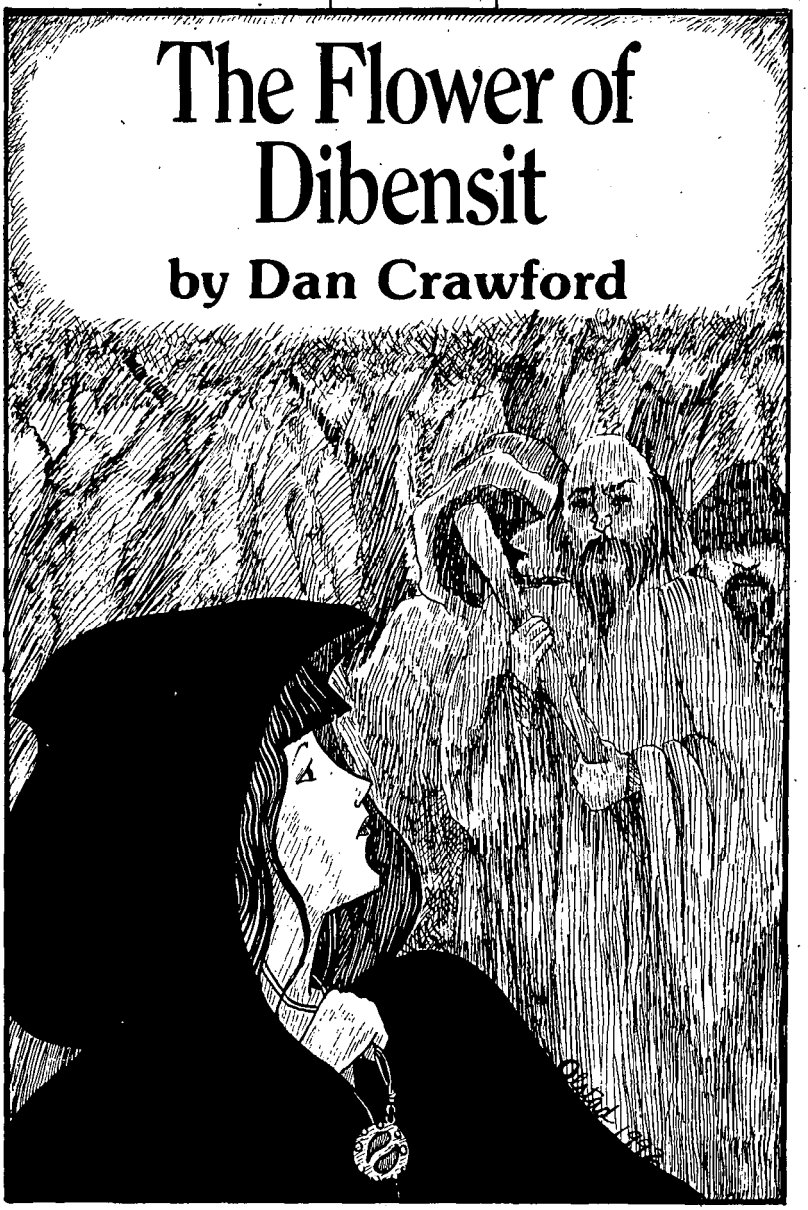


Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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"I have no notion why a thinking person would wish to visit so small a village, so far from everywhere." The carter put out one hand to help the woman step down into the mud from his wagon full of stones.

"They'll be the more desperate for music, I suppose," replied Polijn, adjusting the thick black hood to keep the rain off the windward side of her face. She volunteered no further information; he would have considered that a sign of ill breeding. The carter was an estate man anyway; he would have felt any village to be a waste of time.

The driver waited to see if she would change her mind. Then, with a nod of farewell to the minstrel, he set off, his wheels digging into the mud. The roads were better in South Lattin, even during the dry season. Polijn yanked one foot out of the gluey road surface and started up the northern fork.

The whole world smelled of damp dirt and rotting vegetation; rain had pelted the country steadily for a week. Polijn knew she'd make better progress across country than down this narrow swamp, but you had to stick to the roads in Lattin. Trespassers, even minstrels, became the property of the offended landowner. Not that the noblemen who owned these estates bothered with them, but their overseers and foremen considered trespassers one of the perquisites of the position.

So Polijn slogged along the soggy track. It was, at least, a lightly-used road, its surface not churned by frequent traffic. The main road was a morass, better plowed than the fields around it. Likely she'd be miles back yet had she not gotten on so well with the wagon driver, a huge, square man capable of hauling his cart up out of the muddy ruts fifteen times a day.

Polijn had paid for her two days on the cart with no more than conversation discussing the nature of civilization, whether it was an organic growth of the world or an artificial structure imposed by human inhabitants as a gardener sets out plants and trellises. On her first visit to Lattin, years before, Polijn had been alarmed to find that even the young Lattinese of any class could go on like that for hours. Now she could take it as simply one more challenge to her skill, another way to weave words for the entertainment of listeners.

Something moved in the mists, off to the right of the road. As Polijn came closer, she saw a small child, possibly a

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girl, standing in the rain. This child was watching the road, and there was expectation in her face.

"Good day, my lady!" Polijn called. "I hope you have not waited long!"

The girl did not answer but retained enough of her manners to drop a quick curtsy before she dashed away. She was young enough and light enough, apparently, to pass over the grass without sinking into the mud beneath.

This had to be the town's community property, then; Polijn couldn't recall that any of the local overseers ever took their daughters out with them. She couldn't recall the girl's face, either, but that child could well have been a babe in arms when last Polijn passed this way. Polijn stood still for a moment, appalled by the passage of time. Then she shook herself. She had to be ready for a meeting.

Brushing some of the bigger globs of mud from her black coat, she set off forward with a taller, wider stride. In Lattin, to appear too friendly at first sight was to show yourself a person of no consequence. You had to display hauteur, a condescension indicating that you knew the world was composed entirely of your inferiors. Having met the sorcerous Regent of Rossacotta, Polijn needed no lessons in that.

She had dressed to be daunting, in solid black without ornament. Solid colors were the prevailing style in Lattin, but most residents preferred the lighter hues. Any jewelry, unless you were of noble status, was vulgar.

So Polijn wore her jewels where they could not be seen. A pair of brooches were pinned just inside her tunic, where they could be slid out with either hand in the event that a quick bribe was needed. (The people of Lattin had their dignity but didn't let it interfere with their economic sense.) Farther back, a heavy amulet hung on a chain. It was the largest ornament Polijn owned, and she had also owned it longest. She really had no choice.

A sinkhole in the roadway attracted Polijn's attention, after first capturing one foot. She slid, performing one of the finest splits she had ever done, and splashing mud anywhere it had hitherto been lacking. The Vielfrass would have liked that.

The man—if that was what he was—who had given Polijn the amulet was the biggest bully in a town populated entirely by bullies and victims. He had insulted the regent, a move calculated to bring ready-

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made doom, and walked away laughing. She had seen him tear a man larger than himself into three equal portions and toss the pieces on a compost heap. And she had heard him discourse on bunnies. From that grew his power: knowing him to be both inconveniently powerful and utterly unpredictable, people stayed away from him.

It was entirely like him to give her a magic amulet and not tell her what it did. In all her travels, Polijn had discovered only one power that could not be explained away by natural causes. When she lost it, it always reappeared around her neck on the following dawn. She could not throw away this memento of her miserable home far from the green fields of Lattin.

Actually, these fields weren't so very green yet. The community fields didn't seem to have been planted at all; last year's chaff was rotting in the mud. Of course, Polijn was no expert on the local planting schedules. She had arrived later in the spring on her last trip. Or it could be that the fish were lining up to be caught in this weather. North Lattin was littered with little fishing villages like Dibensit, around all the little lakes that legend said had been gouged out during the wars with Arghast. Crops were largely an afterthought.

But the landscape was truly unfamiliar, unwelcoming, without the friendly wave of the grasses. Certainly this rain made everything look unfriendly. The three men coming up the sloppy road seemed unfriendly enough. But then, Dibensit was bound to pick out the biggest, meanest-looking fishermen to act as the Town Guard.

She did not recognize them—surely she'd know the broken nose on the leader if she'd ever seen him before—but they might know her. She threw back her hood.

The Town Guard stopped and raised its weaponry in a stance half defensive and half ceremonial. "Who comes?" demanded the man with the broken nose.

"Polijn is my name; song is my trade." Her chin came up to suggest that of course everyone knew of her, though not all were fortunate enough to see her in the flesh.

The Town Guard was not so easily impressed. "A minstrel, then," said the leader. "And what is your full name?"

She raised one eyebrow and one nostril, but Polijn knew what was required. "I am Polijn the Black, daughter of Honar, the nephew of Skilen Redhand, son of the storied Bellock." This

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lineage was entirely fictitious, but it satisfied convention. And if there were any such persons, she might well be related to them.

Any argument from the Town Guard would have been to admit its members had not heard of Skilen or Honar, to say nothing of the storied Bellock. In other countries, there was a tenth of a chance someone would admit that. But it could never happen in Lattin.

The leader set down his club and fumbled under his cloak. The flanking guardsmen turned to face the town. They could not move again until their chief took care of business. Very ceremonial, the Lattinese, even in their fishing villages.

The leader brought a slippery brass horn from its place on his belt. As he blasted out an unidentifiable note, his sidemen bellowed, "A road for the minstrel! A road for the minstrel!" Then they motioned Polijn up between them. Polijn took the indicated place; to decline it would be worse than an insult: it would be to deny tradition.

The dented luron was blasted every half dozen paces to let Dibensit know she was coming; this involved almost as much ceremony as the annual procession of the Princess of the Fields. Since that princess of rags and straw was burned at the end of the parade, to ensure a good harvest, Polijn was willing to concede her the extra ceremony.

A high, peaked roof sprouted over the horizon; that would be the temple. Polijn saw another roof pop up, and another, until the horizon was a lush garden of memory. She had seen Dibensit from this angle only a few times, but the village itself was filled with landmarks for her.

She slid her pack around and checked the gifts: bugloss for Cariar's complexion, gollopwort for Stonanstef's indigestion, and, of course, a bit of puckerweed, in hopes of keeping Utisan's mouth shut. Jokes, mainly: the Lattinese had a ponderous sense of humor if you didn't mind digging for it. Things might have changed a bit since her last visit; a few gifts and jokes could help grease her way back in.

Before she got that far, of course, there would have to be a welcoming ceremony, with lots and lots of long speeches. The only short speeches in Lattin were traditional ones; when they spoke unrehearsed, the Lattinese put in all the words they knew. Too short a speech might imply disrespect.

Polijn took a deep breath, seeing the first entire two story

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house. She was a bit disappointed that the people she saw first were not ones she immediately recognized. But the houses she knew at once. Up that street, and to the right, and she would be in the town square. Polijn could name every shop facing the town square, all their owners, and most of their regular customers. Beyond the town, she could name the docks and the fishing boats that rode there. And beyond them, somewhere in the mist and rain, lay great green-brown Sidwith. Not Lake Sidwith, nor Sidwith Lake.

"Any fool can tell it's a lake," Lord Avetrol had told her, prior to a lengthy disquisition on the history of the name.

"It's a minstrel!" shouted a voice from the crowd. Was that disappointment she heard in the tone? Were they expecting the King's Provisioner, on one of his semiannual visits?

But her mind was on the buildings. Time seemed to be shifting around her, taking her back two years. She wondered if she liked it.

Polijn often reached a point in her wanderings when she did not know where she was going next. Sometimes she flipped a coin, if she had one; other times the decision was based on no more than a songbird chirping on that road rather than this. There had been a difference, though, when last she reached such a point.

Her wanderings had begun when she was banished from her homeland for a period of five years. That had been a gift from friends; technically, she was guilty of treason and should have been killed in shreds, the shreds to be thrown into a pit afterward. But some people felt they owed her something.

That was nearly five years ago now, and she was as unsure of herself as when the exile began. Did it matter that she was no longer banished? Should she go home, simply because it was legal?

"A minstrel! Here's a holiday, if you want one!" hollered a man with earrings. So they were wearing earrings up north now.

Polijn had, therefore, started to retrace her travels, visiting a few towns and villages she had passed through before, to find out what she thought of homecomings. So far, the results were inconclusive; Dibensit would be the real test. Two years before, having wandered this far north only through an error in directions, she broke a bone in one foot and was forced to stay here several months, the longest she had spent in any place since childhood. She

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sang at weddings, took part in some of the brangles in the village council, and sat on the steps of the temple, singing or debating with anyone who passed by. In memory, it was a calm and sunlit interlude. (Though if memory spoke true, how could she remember the houses so well in the rain?) The stay was pleasant.

Except for Utisan, of course. That went without saying.

Polijn had learned ancient songs held in respect here and had even thought of staying. Tomaman, the town minstrel, was perennially flat, and the chief councillor, Lord Avetrol, had suggested she stay on as Tomaman's "assistant." They had treated her decently for Lattinese, who considered all foreigners a lower form of life. The position would not have been lucrative, but it would have been comfortable. Comfort was rarer than money in Polijn's experience.

The people were coming out of the houses now, tossing rugs on the roadway for her to walk on. This was far better than her previous entry in the back of a cart, trying not to show the pain her foot was giving her. She searched the crowd for a face she knew. That . . . no, not quite. Of course, it was hard to tell, with everyone shouting, "A minstrel! A minstrel is come!"

Black and brown objects, protesting, fluttered away as they moved on into the village square. Chickens, Polijn thought; chickens. She seemed to recall that chickens weren't allowed in the village square, or any other animals. But memory could play her false, for this was certainly the square she remembered. The inn seemed to have been enlarged, and there was a new banner above the temple. A new mayor could have been elected in her absence, she supposed.

They proceeded directly to the central temple, a massive stone structure in the shape of an overgrown barge. Most of the villagers were already pushing through the wide triangle of a door beneath the inscription TO THE POWER THAT SENDS THE FISH, WHATEVER THAT MAY BE. (These things were determined by royal committee in Lattin, and a village could not be building a new temple every time the committee changed personnel.)

Polijn and her escort moved through the door in their turn. Here was memory indeed. All around the central platform stood tall stone figures of the village's heroes: national, international, and purely local.

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She knew them all, and at least one song about each. A quick check showed her that some of the statues had been shifted. Perhaps there had been an addition to the gallery, but she had no time for a detailed inventory.

Waiting for her on the platform was a man she did not recall but who was apparently the current mayor. Tall, tan, muscular, he was obviously excited by the advent of a minstrel, and concealing it behind his mayoral dignity with some difficulty.

He bowed. "Peace to thee."

"Peace to thee be multiplied," Polijn answered. The exchange was more of a southern tradition, but traditions could travel.

A tall, emaciated man stepped up to them, having conferred with the Town Guard, and, taking hold of one of Polijn's hands and one of the mayor's, said, "Polijn the Black, Lord Sullanabrak."

That was the duty of the town minstrel, but this man looked nothing like Tomaman. Well, it was inevitable that someone of more musical ability would come along. It would have been difficult to find too many performers with less.

The two minstrels then stepped apart from the mayor and took a stand behind him. Polijn braced her feet and her face. The Lattinese were all prepared to talk at length, but give one a title and stand him on a platform and he would try to break records.

"In my year and a half as chief official in this outstanding and prosperous community," said Lord Sullanabrak, "we have had only too seldom the joy of welcoming a skilled professional asmatographer." He thrust the back of his hand at the crowd when he talked, and his head bounced around more than a small tree in a high wind. The fairly flowery discourse dealt with the place of song in human life, and the value of regular recreation of a suitably refined nature. He rambled a bit, but no more than any mayor.

Polijn kept her expression of interest pointed at him but let her eyes sweep across the crowd. Not a single face caught at her memory. Of course, she had been drifting since distant childhood and had had no leisure to observe the seasonal changes of human faces.

The minstrel raised and lowered one finger. It was some kind of signal to the mayor, who suspended his speech and bowed to the thin, precise man, who took Lord Sullanabrak's place for his own welcome to the visiting singer.

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"Welcome, Polijn the Black," he said. "I am called Eriarod, Minstrel of Dibensit."

Polijn waited, but that was all there was. The man had stepped back and was bowing to the spot he had just occupied.

She took her cue, and his place. "I return multiple thanks for this gracious welcome," she said, reaching for her flute. "Certainly Dibensit has a tradition of warm welcoming ceremonies, as in the days of Lord Bidimac and Lord Avetrol."

Fitting her flute together, she sneaked another glance at the crowd. Their faces were blank; a few showed what might be irritation. She had moved too quickly; showing too much familiarity would not win them over.

Where were Bidimac and Avetrol anyhow? Bidimac, at least, would be hard to miss in any crowd, a square, husky man with thick lips and a face of muscle. Of course, the older men might be out fishing late. She couldn't expect the world to drop its business just because she came calling.

"Truly," she told them, "Lord Sullanabrak has the right of it. For the recreational mood . . ." She peered into the darkness. "Utisan isn't here, is he? I may wish to finish a sentence sometime tonight."

Dead silence: obviously, she was going to have to start all over with this village. Utisan, at least, would have laughed. The boy with the unmanageable red hair and less manageable mouth either was not here or had grown into a proper Lattinese citizen in two years. Or maybe nobody did remember her. She'd always wondered if she was remembered when she left a town. She didn't expect to be missed; she herself missed no one when she left a place, but she did remember people.

She smiled gravely at her audience and developed the mayor's theme about the place of song in daily life. This would work nicely into a song about the joyous life of a minstrel, who had the privilege of bringing entertainment to others, and lived a life of pure amusement. (The minstrels she knew were morose creatures when you got them on their own, their conversation dealing with thickheaded audiences and insufficient remuneration. But they were all willing at the drop of a coin to sing about their liberated, carefree existence.)

The audience blossomed into appreciation, which was a great relief. Polijn could, when necessary, charge up an audience by touching the top of her head with her heels, but she

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preferred to keep that trick among her collection of last resorts.

This line led naturally into some classic songs on the subject by such masters as Ulan and Targon, songs which always paid before a Lattinese audience because if they didn't feel like applauding the singer, they would at least applaud themselves for recognizing the song. She was into her third tune, having paused between songs for some discourse on the topic of the evening, when a bell tolled. Eriarod took a basket down from the wall.

Polijn went on singing, restraining with difficulty the little shudder of pleasure the sound brought her. That was certainly the curfew warning bell of Dibensit as she had heard it dozens of times before. The basket was for an audience much too dignified to throw money.

Of course this basket had to be spoken over before it was presented. Lord Sullanabrak came up to receive it and pass it along. As his gratitude ground on, Polijn counted the take. Several copper coins, one silver piece, a couple of fish tokens, a ring, and a half dozen or so rolls, not a bad take for so small a village.

The mayor's thanks ended with an invitation to spend the night in his house. That was no more than Polijn had expected. This far north there were mighty few travelers, and the mayor had to get the business news: which neighboring villages were catching fish, which weren't, and where the markets were hungriest.

The second curfew warning bell ended the speech and signaled a procession to Lord Sullanabrak's house. The audience cheered and shouted in escort, though the cheering was damped a bit by the rain and diminished as members of the throng stepped into their houses en route.

"Here is our guest room, Milady Polijn," said the mayor, unlocking the door. "Enter, with all our good wishes and affection."

Polijn returned a proper formula of thanks, but her mind wasn't on it. The smell had hit her, a cool, damp smell. Yes, she knew it, and in the darkness she could just make out the low half-table and bed inside. She had slept in this room virtually every night for six months. Any remaining fears that she had walked into the wrong village had to be tossed out for mulch.

She stepped inside the door and waited for the mayor to follow. "I would gladly have speech with you this evening,

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Milady Polijn," he said, with a nod and half a bow. "But there is the curfew to be thought of. Tomorrow afternoon, perhaps, we can speak, unless the fish be running. Peace to thee."

He bowed again. Polijn bowed back. "Peace to thee be multiplied." He closed the door.

She felt her way to the bed. When last she'd visited Dibensit, the curfew was not so rigorously enforced that the mayor couldn't walk from his own guest house around to the main body of his home. Things might have changed, of course. Dibensit must have grown, to require an addition to an inn that was not so greatly visited before.

She thought she could remember seeing the inn from the window of this room, and edged her way up to it. Maybe the addition had been just a trick of the rain.

The shutters could not be pushed open. By running her fingers along the wood, Polijn could feel the heads of nails that held them shut. Odd: this guest room was constructed so that the guest would have a view of the lake, from which came the town's support.

She rolled backward and slid her legs under the thin blankets before shuffling off her soaked shift. Tonight she had nothing more immediate to worry about than sleep. Tomorrow she might find someone of less consequence to talk to. Children were not so offended by questions as the adult Lattinese.

Everything was still damp in the morning. Polijn checked her pack to make sure there'd been no damage. She took one of the rolls that had been part of her payment and began to nibble at it. The traditional mass breakfast and breakfast mass, part of the morning ritual in every Lattinese fishing town, would be held in the temple soon. She'd need a little food to sustain her throughout the Lattinese prayers.

Polijn was one of the first people out of the temple after breakfast, taking up her spot on the broad outer porch. The drizzle couldn't quite reach her when she sat on the leeward side of the rail. She fitted her flute together and tried a few notes. On her earlier stay, her lap would have been occupied at this point by a large black cat, improbably named Lily. She saw no cats in the square now, only chickens. Cats, having more brains than a potato, were too clever to be out in this.

Utisan would have been, though. Polijn was afraid to look at the corner where he'd

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have been leaning. But no, he wasn't there.

She slapped some of the mist away from her face. The climate here was known as Arghast's Curse, the people blaming it on an ancient emperor, dead now, if he had ever lived, for fifteen centuries but whose power, at least in song and story, extended to the weather as a matter of course. Fish had to support the people here; the growing season was too short and uncertain to produce anything but stunted plant life.

Polijn searched her memory for a few fishing songs. She couldn't help breaking off after the first three bars. It would be just about now that Utisan would have said something like . . .

"It's too muddy for me to play in the garden today."

The voice was wrong, so Polijn peeked. The comment had come from a round-faced girl, not a very young girl, wearing a sodden blanket secured by a belt.

A tall woman scowled down and brought a fist against the side of the girl's head. "Don't fret the minstrel."

Polijn made no move. She had smiled once on Utisan and had never been rid of him after. Utisan didn't come to hear the music or to listen to stories; he did not bother Polijn with questions. No, he wanted only to talk, to talk endlessly about whatever came into his head, convinced that whatever occupied him was of supreme importance to the universe. He started talking before he came within earshot and was still talking as his parents dragged him home to bed. If he thought of something else to say in the middle of the night, he'd sneak out of his house and come banging on the door of the mayor's guest room.

Utisan eventually became something of a joke, which Polijn enjoyed no less than the rest of the village. He was such a determined nuisance that exasperation mixed with admiration.

What had become of him, what had he turned into as he aged? Maybe he hadn't aged, which would be a boon to the whole county. Mortality as well as life came from the lake: storms, floods, overturned boats shortened lives. Or someone might have decided simply to shut him up. That's the way it would have worked in her old neighborhood.

The girl was shouldered to one side by a listener seeking a spot with more shelter from the rain. "Ow!" she said as she was bumped against a column. She shook back her blanket from

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her hands. Polijn could see deep red marks around her wrists.

The girl looked up just then and fancied she saw sympathy in the minstrel's eyes. "Don't you hate it when you bump your hands?" she demanded. "I just hate it."

"Hush!" ordered the tall woman, her whisper fierce. "Or you can go home and back to bed right now."

The moonfaced creature stuck out her lower lip and rubbed one chafed wrist, looking to Polijn.

Polijn suspected that she was dooming herself to fruitless frustration. But she had wanted someone who was willing to talk. And she was two years older now; surely she would be able to escape if she wanted to.

"That can be nasty," she said, and was immediately rewarded by a broad smile. She waved her hand across the square toward a low stone building with a big chip out of the doorstep. "As nasty as some of Sapalay's cheeses. What do you think of them?"

The girl turned completely around to look and then turned completely back to Polijn before laughing, as if in enjoyment of a shared joke. "Oh, that would be nasty!" she said, her words occluded with gurgling giggles. "Eating something at a rope shop!"

"A rope shop! Imagine eating at a rope shop!" Polijn replied, showing no surprise since, after all, a minstrel was expected to know everything. "How silly! You're sure it's a rope shop, though? It might have shriveled away and had a cheese shop grow up in its place during the night."

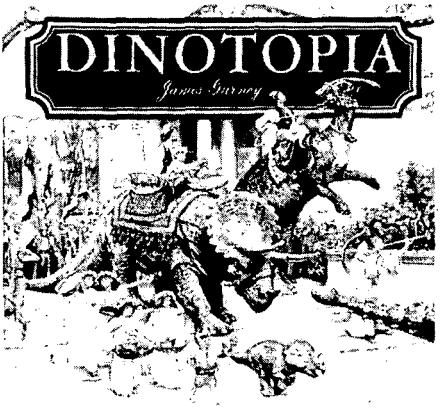
The girl laughed some more and Polijn laughed back, all the while cocking an eyebrow at the adults in the audience. A few laughed uncertainly, not quite seeing what was funny; others nodded gravely as if detecting a deep philosophical point. Nobody stepped forward to identify Sapalay's cheese shop, which she was certain lay behind the chipped doorstep.

She set it to one side in her mind; minstrels had more important duties than tending their rotting memories. "But such a thing happened once, to Gicheran when he went forth against the dragon of Yiquer."

It was the first story she had happened to think of, but it succeeded beyond all her experience. They hung on her every word, except for the girl, who offered a running commentary throughout. "What's that word mean? I saw a rat yesterday. It was running down on the pier. Do you like rats?" No number

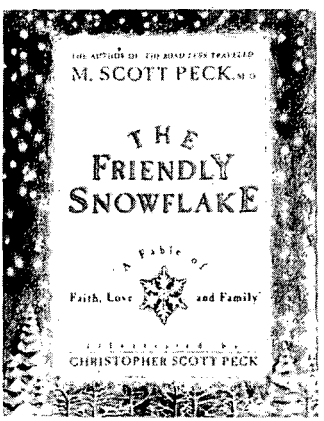
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of thumps from the tall woman, apparently her mother, could shut off the flow of questions for long.

Polijn, having expected this sort of thing (only from Utisan instead), was able to continue the story over the top of it, disconcerted only once when she declared, "And Gicheran walked out to meet the dragon as cheerfully as you might walk out to the pier to meet your father."

The girl released a squealing laugh, echoed by some of the other children, and exclaimed, "I couldn't walk out on the pier! Girls don't get to go out on the pier!"

Polijn looked to the others for confirmation. When they agreed that only men and boys were allowed on the piers, she smiled and said, "Of course. It's the only reasonable way to do things. I did say as you 'might' walk out on the pier." The song went on. It had been perfectly all right when she was last in Dibensit for females to tread the boards of the piers.

The audience was overwhelmingly grateful for the story, seven of the women crowding up when it was finished to discuss various points of philosophy raised in the verse. The children clamored for more and called for their favorites, some of them shouting out the first line of riddles they knew she'd know.

Polijn preferred children in groups, and at a safe distance. She had no objection to them; she just had no idea what to do about them when faced by them. The children, particularly her special friend, had no such doubts about her. The elegant creature in black, with her songs and sly jokes, existed solely to amuse them. Their minds had not yet been seeded by experience; suspicion did not grow there.

Such sunny faces on such a rainy day! And Utisan had been just the same. And his parents, too. These adults were a little more dour than the ones she remembered. Now that the song of the dragon-killing was ended, they had lapsed into their normal expression: a bit nervous, a bit grim. One or two glanced back at the lake; perhaps the weather was having some effect on the fishing and their livelihood was in jeopardy.

Polijn sang some more, talked even more, and answered a vast number of questions asked her in highpitched voices, about every subject from dragons to fish to whether princes wore stockings. Everyone moved off to the cheese shop for a light lunch toward the middle of the day, the chil-

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dren fighting for the right to hold the umbrella over the minstrel. (The five who won were rather short and kept bumping her head with it.) This was the real cheese shop, belonging to a man named Ariamust and occupying a shop Polijn thought had been the cobbler's. She had a peek inside the rope shop later that afternoon. Sure enough, it was Sapalay's cheese shop; she knew those shelves and those niches in the walls. It was a cheese shop sure enough. But there was no cheese. It was all rope, of various sizes and qualities.

She knew the names of a hundred villagers before dark fell, but no one knew the names she mentioned. They remembered no mayor but Lord Sullanabrak, and answered to none of the hints she threw out about old village scandals. As dusk sprouted and spread across the clouds, she sat at the temple, staring at Dallinboel's rope shop, listening to the charcoalmaker's wife discussing warfare, whether the seeds were spread by misunderstanding or by human orneriness.

Ariamust, she said to herself. Dallinboel.

That was wrong. Villages had their own accents, which might vary noticeably as little as ten miles away. They had their own naming customs, and hereditary names passed on to alternating generations. And in the Dibensit she had known, the names were shorter: Sapalay, Avetrol, Utisan. Now there was Sullanabrak, Dallinboel, and the girl Cefernica.

The people of the Dibensit she knew had drawled their *a*'s and bit off their final syllables. These people did something different with their *f*'s and their *l*'s. The older people in that old Dibensit had worn a peculiar bellshaped hat. She couldn't tell if that was still done because, now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen any of the older folk.

The names were wrong. The accent was wrong. And the clothing was wrong: here were striped stockings, necklaces of seeds, worn openly. But the buildings were right. Dibensit was here, and Dibensit was missing.

She shrugged. Things could change, whether you wanted them to or not. It was no doubt better to entertain the people who were here than worry about the ones who were not. When Lord Sullanabrak summoned her, he might explain. Intervillage warfare was not unknown, even in Lattin; perhaps he could tell her which way the survivors had fled. It was entertaining to think of

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Utisan as the daring forest outlaw he had always wanted stories about (though he chattered all the way through them and couldn't have heard more than three words).

Lord Sullanabrak did not summon her. Polijn ate supper with the blacksmith, whose tiny daughter was another of Cefernica's special friends. Cefernica tagged along, saying, "Mamma won't mind." Polijn believed it. She herself would not have minded if Cefernica had gone off to eat almost anywhere else. Her attempts to crush this budding worship had proved futile. Cefernica didn't eat much, preferring to talk and to stare at Polijn in adoration.

Polijn was no closer to any answers by the time candles were being lit in the temple. But she was able to pry herself away from Cefernica by noting how improper it would be for the girl to be on the central platform with the mayor. Cefernica saw the justice of this after her little friend chimed in on the minstrel's side, and instead took up a stand at the front of the audience, laughing and applauding whenever Polijn spoke.

At least Polijn had had time to take stock of public tastes during her performances to the smaller crowds. Those listeners loved tales of heroic victories, especially over monsters. So after the mayor's overgrown discourse on the meaning of life and fish, she started in on "The Dragon Ate the Horse's Tail," an adventure greeted all through the north with cheers after the first two chords.

When she had moved through five chords and reaped no recognition, she paused. A thought struck her. Her sixth and seventh chords led instead toward "Red Star in the Pool," a favorite in South Lattin.

The people shouted, and Polijn tapped the strings of the ficdual. Yes, something was wrong here.

Protocol demanded, when the song ended, that she speak a brief (for Lattin) piece and turn the attention of the crowd over to Eriarod, as village minstrel. "We would not want to emulate Niconet, who paid three dowries on two daughters," she noted in the course of this segue.

It was a reference to a very old Dibensit scandal, and Polijn was prepared to have it passed over in silence. From somewhere to the right, though, a laugh popped up like a mushroom, and was as quickly swallowed.

But Polijn had very good ears. As Eriarod sang to the crowd, she whispered to Lord

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Sullanabrak, "That man—the one who's leaving—isn't his name Maboric?"

"Oh no, my lady," the mayor replied. "His name is Capisjami. I know of no Maboric."

"Ah," said Polijn, nodding. "He looked like someone I know."

He was someone she knew; Polijn was sure of it. Maboric and his wife had been the town brewers, persons of some consequence. She had dined at their home a dozen times.

That night, after the second curfew bell had warned people to bed, she slipped out of her room into the rain. She had dodged night watches before; surely she hadn't gotten so fat from her years on the road that she couldn't slip away still.

Maboric's house and brewery had been off at the north end of the village, near the lake. Brewers and all their equipment were valuable. Perhaps the conquerors had kept him when the other villagers fled.

She paused. With the drip and drop all around her, she couldn't be sure of sounds. But that had seemed to be the suck of mud pulling away from a foot. And she wasn't heavy enough to sink that deep.

Her body and head stayed as they were. Her eyes moved, searching damp shadows. There, in the shelter of that addition to the inn: three men were slipping forward, silently they thought.

The night watch would not be sneaking in the shadows. Now, perhaps, she'd learn something. They might be agents of the old villagers, easing into town on murky nights to pry out the secrets of their successors.

Their clubs were raised. Best to let them know she was a friend as soon as possible. Polijn turned, lifted a hand, and whispered, "What news?"

They stopped, saluted her, and then rushed at her. They were Lattinese all right: they intended to kill her, but they would show no disrespect to a minstrel.

Polijn had been braced for the possibility that they would not be immediately friendly, and slid under their first attack. She didn't try to hail them again. These long rain hoods with slits for the eyes were not what the old villagers had worn; these were newcomers.

Her hand slipped into her tunic, passed the amulet the Vielfrass had given her, and plucked one of the brooches. These fisherfolk were more surefooted in the mud than she, but Polijn had tussled with experts and these were no experts. Killing was not their

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trade, and they kept swinging at her head when what they should have done was knock her down first and then crush her skull.

She danced out of their way again and again, sliding here and there in the mud but being sure her slides took her away from her assailants. When she did pass within their reach, she struck first, jabbing the pin of the brooch into hands and wrists. Her aim was not for the death of the attackers but to leave marks, and hurt them enough to make them draw back.

They did not draw back. They didn't like being stung by this little wasp, but they were intent on their errand, whatever it was. One of the men, lighter and more maneuverable than his partners, caught her around the waist. Polijn stabbed again and again into his arm, but he was wearing a thick coat. Fortunately, the other two men had no idea how to attack her without damaging the third.

The impasse was broken, as was the silence, when the man holding Polijn, attempting to contain her struggles, stepped back against one of the village's little chicken coops. Distracted fowl ran screeching left and right. The man liked that less than he liked being stabbed in the arm.

"Come on!"

Two men ran. The third released Polijn. A clattering sound echoed, obviously indicating the approach of the real night watch. Polijn kept her eyes on that third man. He drew a knife, aimed, and threw. Only then did he follow his partners.

Polijn dodged as coolly as he had aimed. The knife went wide, but her foot caught in the debris from the broken coop. She landed hard on one shoulder and then scampered away on all fours.

She had meant to return to her room and plot her strategy there. But Lord Sullanabrak appeared, his eyes searching the darkness. He had on his raingear and gloves, as if he intended to go somewhere.

"My lady!" he exclaimed, seeing her. "I heard the rattle of the night watch. Did you . . ."

"I heard it, too," she panted. "But when I went out to see, I met someone who was not the night watch." She put a hand toward her shoulder, slipping the brooch out of sight as she did so.

"After dark?" demanded the mayor, shocked. "In our village? Why, that's . . . You're hurt?"

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"Just a bruise," she told him, taking his hand for support. "I'm sure it will be fine in the morning."

He pulled his hand free and put that arm around her shoulders. "You must see our doctor. Someone struck you?"

She tried to move toward the guest room; he did not let go. "I'm sure . . ."

"We cannot have injury coming to an honored guest," he informed her. "I insist that you are seen in good season. Mosceterat's home is at the end of this lane; the doctor sign hangs out front, as is proper. Here, my lady." He brought a wooden object from inside his coat. "Take this pass, and if the night watch stops you, remind them I am still mayor of this village."

Polijn was surprised by a touch of bitterness in his voice. After a glance at him, she moved out through the mud. The pass was in her hand, but she took no chances, staying in the shadows as she walked along the street.

"What's this, then?" a voice demanded when she knocked at the heavy door. The man who opened it was clothed but said, "It's past curfew. Have you some emergency?"

Polijn shrugged; it hurt a little. "The mayor sent me." She held up the pass. "But it's just a bruise."

"Come in, then, come in, before the night watch sees us," the man replied. "Think they own the night. I had meant to invite you to dine here, my lady, in time; this isn't the best way to introduce myself to you. Where is this bruise?"

Polijn exposed the shoulder. The man had a gentle touch and kept up a stream of inconsequential chatter that did not require a reply: very Lattinese but rather comforting.

"No, just a bruise, as you said," he told her as she pulled her garments back together. "Be all right in a fortnight. Here."

He turned to a small worktable and took up a bottle. He poured a small amount of the liquid into a mug and handed it to her. "This will help you sleep. Sleep is the great healer, you know."

Polijn took the mug. "Wouldn't oleander be quicker?"

The man's brows snapped toward each other. "Oleander?"

"My familiarity with plants can't be as good as yours. This may well serve your purpose, but I just wondered whether oleander might not kill me the quicker."

Mosceterat stared at her for a long second. Then his hand lashed out to knock the mug

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from her hand. He glared at it as it rolled.

When his eyes came up, Polijn had a dagger out. "I am from Rossacotta," she informed him. "We like our speeches short. Cut yours or I may be tempted to do it."

"How did you know?"

She raised the dagger. She would be no match for him even if she were in perfect shape. But he could not be expected to know this, and he was rattled already.

He sat down on a low stool. "Of course," he said. "The scratches. The mayor, too?"

"He wore gloves," she said, keeping the dagger where it was. "But I felt him pull back when I squeezed his hand."

"It really was a sleeping potion," he told her. "You would not have awakened for a day or two, but that would likely have served our purpose." He sighed. "The roads are blocked; the prisoners won't come through."

"Prisoners? What prisoners?"

He swallowed. "The prisoners we feed to . . . whatever it is."

Polijn's eyes narrowed. "Feed?"

The doctor nodded. "We've been feeding it ever since we . . . came north. None of us has seen it but the priest. But the prisoners never come back; it must be there."

None of this was making much sense to Polijn. "Were the people who were here before feeding this thing?"

He shook his head. "There were no other people. Except Maboric. You weren't supposed to see him."

"No one?" she demanded. "Where did they go?"

"We assume they refused to feed whatever it is, and it took them." He shrugged. "Or else the army reprimanded them."

"Army?"

"The king's army. They escorted us from our village in the south." He lifted his hands. "The fishing was poor, and the message came that anyone who wanted to volunteer could move to a village in the north. We had all sorts of regulations to follow—the king would supply the personnel for our night watch, we'd observe a strict curfew, we'd cover our doors and windows facing the lake—but times were hard. We didn't ask questions."

"You weren't even curious to look for whatever it was?"

The doctor held his hands toward her. "What became of the people before us? They probably knew what the thing was, and they're gone."

"If I were feeding something that way," said Polijn, "I'd at

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least want to know what it was."

"Don't you see?" the doctor demanded. "As long as we don't know, we're safe. We've had no troubles with it, whatever it is, or the king. I'd rather no one found out about you, either; if they have to come for you, they might take us as well."

"So it was easier to put me to sleep and feed me to it," said Polijn. The dagger hadn't moved.

"The only other way is to get you away from here," said the doctor. "I'd just as soon you lived, myself, but the minstrel said this way would satisfy whatever it is, too. But if you think you can trust me, we can put the story around that you're dying. You can stay here until your 'death,' and we can smuggle you out of the village, take your body out in a boat, and land you somewhere else."

Polijn put her dagger away. "Very well," she said. "I'll get my pack from the mayor's house and return. I still have his pass."

"I'll make things ready," the doctor said, rising.

Polijn watched him, but he did nothing sinister. She nodded to him. "May you always have a warm place to sleep," she said, and stepped out into the rain again.

She had no intention of returning. Her pack was with her, but it was the best excuse she had been able to come up with. Trust couldn't grow from the seeds of doubt that potion had planted. Polijn meant to leave now, through the fields. Maybe the foremen wouldn't be patrolling after dark, in the rain. Her problem now was to keep the night watch from finding out. They could not legally follow her onto private land, but like Polijn, they knew this counted only if they were caught.

She eased through the shadows, glancing in all directions for the watchmen. She saw no one afoot, but there seemed to be some activity on the nearest pier, a man walking toward shore. Polijn wondered why. After another backward glance, she started for the lake.

He saw her coming and folded his arms. "Greetings, my lady," he said as she reached the wood.

"Greetings," she replied. "Maboric, I think?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm waiting for it to rise. One more night, but they won't get through."

"What is it?" she asked.

He put out a hand toward dark water. "It was in the lake, dormant for years. We never knew until it started calling people, people who never came

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back. Lord Bidimac sent me to the king for help while he checked through old books for an answer. It called him then, and his wife, and the others. We'd discussed it in council. Some said we should sacrifice to it so we could pick the victims, rather than letting it call whom it pleased. They never got the chance to try it, and Bidimac was so hot about wanting it dead."

He turned away from Polijn and started down the shore, still talking. "The army rounded up everyone, took them out on a barge, and sank it in the middle of the lake."

"Everyone? How did you escape?"

"I did not escape. For a month it didn't come back, and now it rises every five weeks." He pointed across the water. "Do you know, there used to be good skating here in the winter, way, way out. But Sidwith never freezes now. Never a splinter of ice."

"The thing still calls victims?" Polijn demanded. She had heard tales of creatures that sang their victims into submission.

Maboric shook his head. "It seems to understand. It rises, and we send out a runner to the nearest army post. Within three days, they bring us prisoners. It calls only if the prisoners aren't brought on the third day. They come to the mayor; the guards from the king stay in the new room at the inn. The night watch escorts them to me down here and puts them on the altar. They go back; I wait. I was spared to be the thing's attendant, its priest. No one knows about it, really, but the king and a few ministers, and the night watch. The king is to use it as a secret weapon, once he has pleased it enough to learn how to use it."

"Have they ever failed to send prisoners before?"

Maboric sat down on a broad rectangle of stone. "Men, mostly," he said. "A few women. We find only their clothes in the morning."

"What are their crimes?" she asked.

"I don't talk to them." He shuddered. "Once they sent a three-year-old girl, just the age of my . . . she was the daughter of the wrong prince. The fishing's good, anyhow. The fish come to shore, away from the spot where it appears."

"And the king intends to take it out of the lake and use it?" Polijn demanded. "How?"

Maboric shrugged. "He is the king; ask him. Perhaps he thinks he can raise some more." He shrugged again. "I think I will go, this time, if it

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will take me. I can't do this forever. I will wait on the altar."

He gestured to the stone he sat on. "They found it after they sank the barge."

The stone was chipped and showed signs of burning. At each corner was a ring of black stone. Maboric touched one of these, and it split into two semicircles. "This opens when the . . . call comes."

"The victims could run away."

"They don't," he said. "Not when they're being called. We think these rings are older than the stone. There's some kind of inscription under each one, but we've never been able to read the letters."

"It may be some kind of counterspell," said Polijn, kneeling a bit to peer at the stone. She could see nothing, of course, in the darkness. "Some sort of runic inscription." She put a hand on the stone, feeling for graven letters.

A click pointed out her mistake. "I am sorry," said Maboric, before taking off into the village.

Polijn pulled at the cuff but had an idea that breaking loose would require rather more power than she could bring to the job. The cuff was so cold. And dry.

She heard a bubble pop but didn't look back for a few seconds. When she did see the nodding head, as large as a horse, breaking the surface of the lake, she was not especially surprised. She crouched in the mud, trying to remember everything she'd ever heard about singing monsters.

She did remember how to squeeze her hand so that it was small enough to slip through a cuff. But the cuff knew this, too, and shrank to match her.

No call had come from the lake yet. In fact, the thing rose with an entirely unfriendly silence. Not a splash or a ripple disturbed the water.

She took a deep breath. That was not the head. The nodding object was no more than a topknot. Strands of floating pink hair showed that the real head would come next. A pink glow rose into the air, illuminating the raindrops. The glow expanded until it seemed that a shower of pink was dropping into a pink lake.

No, said her brain, contradicting her eyes, that isn't it at all.

It was, though. The pink glow rose from hairy tendrils behind a flower, a flower as big as the mayor's house and still growing. Gray petals drooped like a mustache on either side of a pulsating pink sac. Above this were two thick bars of pink hair and, between them, a little

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green leaf like a finger, beckoning to the opening of the sac.

A black stem and mottled leaves sat below all this, but Polijn was beginning to notice the fragrance more. The odor was filled with danger, danger old and deep beyond her imagining. She looked to the north where tales put the ancient evils of the empire of Arghast.

So the king of Lattin was going to gather the seeds of this thing that he simply fed, and grow more. There was power here, so he wanted it all, just in case he learned how to use it. If this was a remnant of a power dead for fifteen centuries, what other bits of that empire remained to be awakened when this perfume was spread across the continent?

Not that there was a thing she could do about it. The roots were deep beyond her diving. To poison the lake would only be to kill the village a second time. And no blade wielded by her could cut that stem.

If it was a weapon of evil, perhaps it could be killed through concentrated virtue. Polijn didn't often laugh when off duty, but she had to laugh at that.

The flower shook and seemed to turn a little. Its fragrance swept around her.

It wanted her. It wanted her for many things and would cause her pain in many ways and she would go to it.

The shackle on her wrist broke open. Polijn was faintly aware that she could run now. Instead she slid her pack to the ground and started to slip off her raingear.

The water would freeze her unprotected body and bring both misery and pain. The flower would make that seem like a dream and a rest and she would go to it.

Polijn unfastened her tunic. The odor of the flower was thicker, seeming to block eyes, ears, and nose.

She would be broken down and digested, to die only when the plant lost interest, and she would go to it.

Her hand inside her tunic fell against the heavy amulet the Vielfrass had given her. She paused. The oddest thought had struck her.

Why should I?

The feeling had nothing to do with fear, or even a desire to go on living. The feeling amounted to no more than a sudden impulse to disoblige something that was so big and so confident.

I don't care, she thought. I don't care if I live or die. I don't care if *you* live or die.

Polijn's vision cleared. She turned toward the flower, which seemed to shudder. "You

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may keep your power," she announced. "I don't want it. And you don't matter enough for me to fight you. Do what you like. I don't care."

Now she turned her back on the lake and reached, with her free hand, for her pack. Perfume swirled so thickly around her she could all but see it billowing in the rain. But it no longer registered on her mind. She took out a slide whistle and started in on a chirpy little tune.

Who cares? she thought, knowing the flower would feel that. She did not look up again until she heard the splop of feet in the mud again.

For a moment she feared they were coming for her. But as the villagers pulled into an orderly procession, she realized what had happened. The children were silent, the adults were silent. There were no orders, no speaking, no ceremony: entirely unnatural in the Lattinese.

The villagers were sloughing off their clothes; the flower had given up on Polijn and decided to take everyone else instead.

Sudden fear brought her a whiff of the flower's fragrance again. She clutched the amulet more closely. What were all these people to her? She had met them only two days ago, and tonight they had tried to kill her. (In self-defense, it was true, but she'd have been just as dead.)

She saw herself out in front of the temple, telling the tale of Tarogow. The song was just reaching its big buildup to the appearance of the Swamp Dancer.

"I bet this will be scary, huh?" said Utisan. "I'm scared when there's thunder. Aren't you scared by thunder? I'm not scared of rain, though."

Polijn looked around at the villagers. Then she reached out. She didn't grab; that would be to care. One hand just went out to touch that little girl who was such a good friend of Cefernica.

The child blinked, looked up, and clapped her hands. "Mamma! Look at the funny flower!"

That stung somewhere. The villagers paused. One or two shook their heads. The little girl reached out to tug at her mother's dress. The woman reached down automatically, asking, "What is it now?"

Those villagers who had been strong-minded enough to come out of their trance were starting to figure it out. Polijn saw the mayor reach for a knife. She had to put a stop to that.

"Say!" she shouted. "Lord Sullanabrak! What's the most

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fish you ever caught in one day?"

The mayor glanced at the minstrel, frowned, and turned back toward the lake. Polijn blew a piercing blast on the slide whistle.

He stared at her, but he had not become mayor through stupidity. "Why, oh, ah, yes. Certainly we'll never forget last spring. That would be the catch of the fourth of Ringère."

Fish stories spread, bringing other villagers out of the community trance. Conversation was forced at first, but instinct took over. All had a story to tell, stories that had been told before but lost nothing in the retelling. The people of Dibensit turned their backs to the lake to talk fish and fishing technique.

One or two peeked, of course. Eriarod moved up and down the line, prompting them with a question about the weather here, a comment about boat care there. Cooking fish would do for a subject if nothing else leaped to mind. Polijn kept up a chirpy little refrain on her whistle.

They heard the great splash at the same time that they felt it, like a jarring drop onto a dock. Of one mind voluntarily now, all turned to look.

Pink ooze spread across the water, glowing at first, then shimmering a little from the lightning. At the fourth flash, the lake rolled dark and deep.

There was silence on the shore. Then a man stepped up to Polijn and knelt before her.

"What can I say, my lady?" asked Maboric. It was a terrible thing for a native of Lattin to have to ask.

"We owe you everything we have," Eriarod agreed, kneeling with him.

"The village," said Lord Sullanabrak, coming up beside them with the doctor not far behind. "Our lives, our souls, if any."

"By rights we should give you the village," Mosceterat agreed. "But it probably isn't worth much, particularly once the king learns of this."

"The king," said Maboric. "Well, it can't be helped. We can die free, at least. You have given us that, as well."

"You shall have more," Polijn promised them. "I'll give you your night watchmen and your town guards, who must now either settle among you or return to the king and report failure. I think they can, without much coaxing, be convinced to support your tale of this dreadful calamity."

"Calamity?" said the doctor. "What calamity?"

Polijn tipped her head back. "About a vicious sorceress, call-

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ing herself Polijn the Black, who summoned you to the lake after dark—forced you from your beds by magic when you rightly refused. She raised a mighty flower from the water and then made it wilt, and finally flew away astride a giant flute, without telling you what this vision meant. He could tell you, but he won't, because that would reveal his secret. He may not blame you for what the sorceress did, though just what a king will do at any time is not within even my imagination."

The night watch was taking a quick and obviously affirmative vote. But Lord Sullanabrak frowned. "You will be unable to stay, then."

"True," she said. "But I never meant to stay. Perhaps I can spread a few more tales of this sorceress on my way, so that there will be evidence to support you in other parts of Lattin."

The village cheered and bore the minstrel to the great temple, much to her discomfort. There was more talk of giving her things, of gold, of family jewels carried from their home in the south.

"I can't carry all that," she told them when she could break through the buzz of talk. She looked around the temple. "But perhaps a statue."

"We certainly will honor you with a statue," said the mayor, glancing around at his people.

She shook her head. "Not of me. You will hardly convince your king that I was a villain if you do that." She looked at a spot of air that was empty. She put her hand just there.

"What I had in mind," she said, "was a statue of a small boy, about so tall, with unmanageable hair and a snub nose. His name was Utisan. He has saved you if anyone has."

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UNSOLVED

by Walter Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

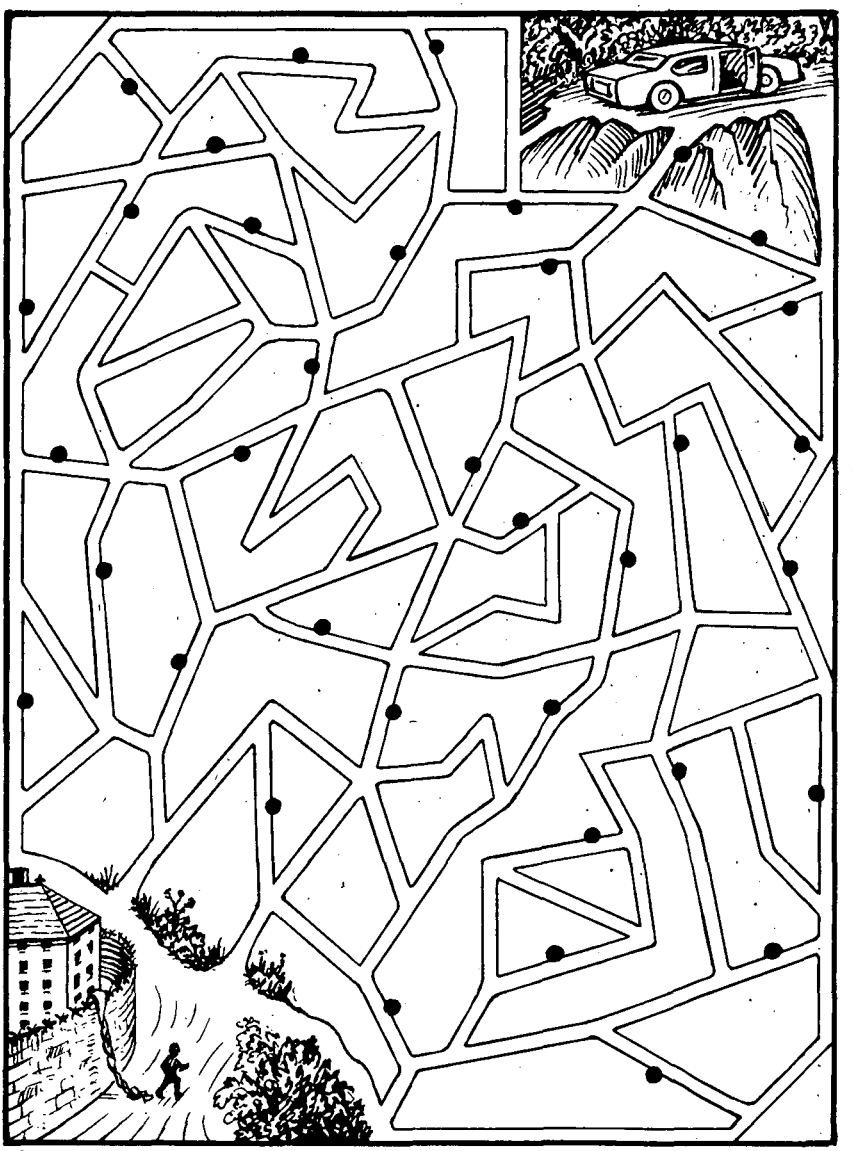
Slippery Sam has just escaped from Swing-Swing Prison by a rope of knotted sheets. A getaway car awaits him on the other side of a wide and dangerous swamp. This is crisscrossed with safe paths, but guards have been stationed at all the strategic points, and Sam's task is to get to the car without passing any of them. Find at least two ways *having no paths in common* by which he may succeed, and also make a guess at the number of guards (large round dots) without counting them.

Note: *You may take ten marks if you never pause or have to retrace your path, but knock one off every time you stop or turn back to try another way.*

See page 60 for the solution to the March puzzle.

"Getting Away with It" from BIG BOOK OF MAZES AND LABYRINTHS *by Walter Shepherd, originally published by Dover Publications, Inc. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).*

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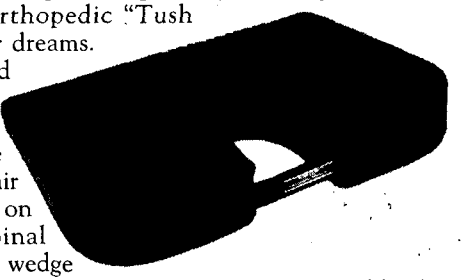


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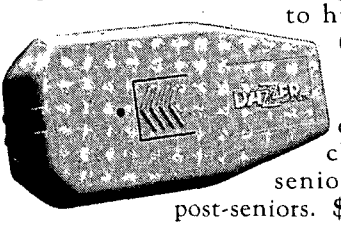
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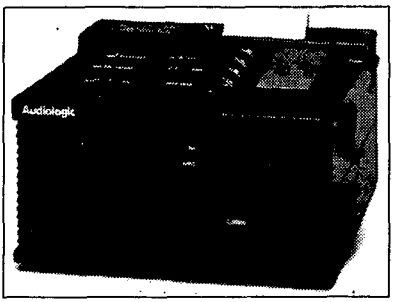


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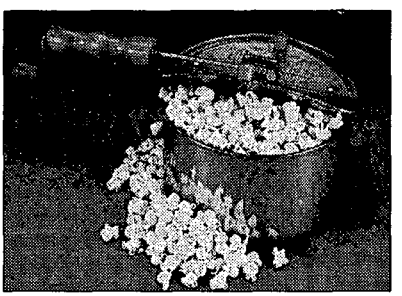
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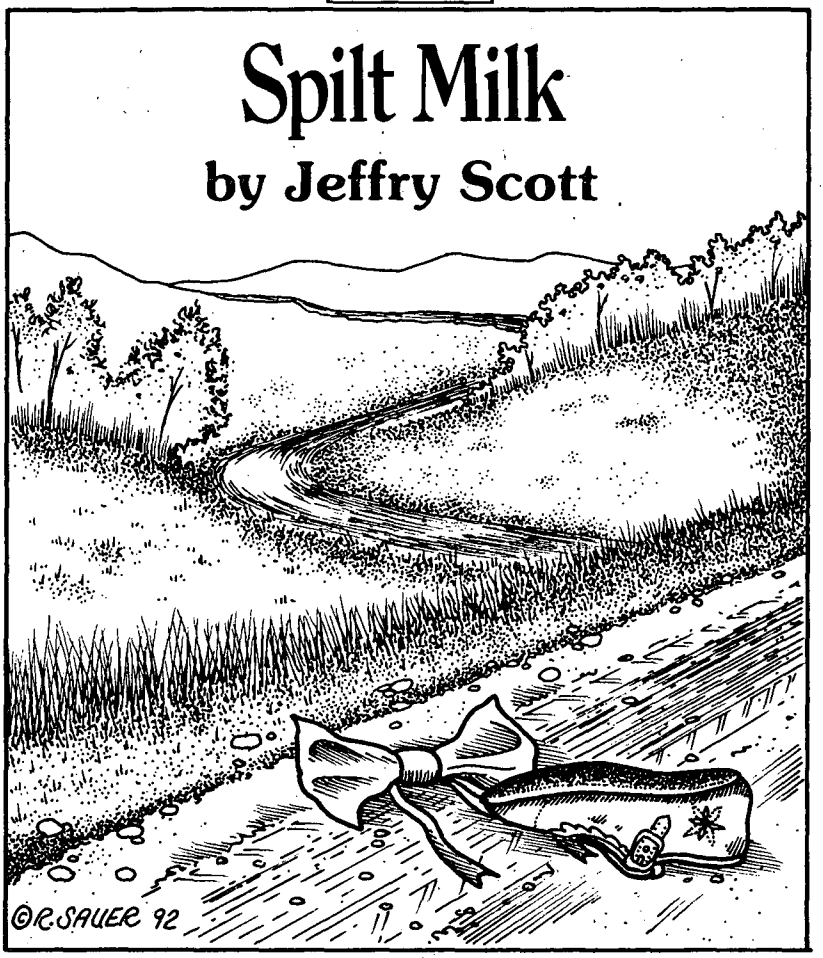


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Spilt Milk

by Jeffry Scott



It would have been accepted as accidental death but for Jo Kittrick's retentive memory . . .

Iris Moger had a startling insight and made a disturbing prediction. That might have been the end of it, for she went to her grave without discovering whether her premonition was genuine. Might have been, but was not, because certain years later, Detective-inspector Kittrick recalled the prophecy.

Jo was still a sergeant when

Illustration by Richard Sauer

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she knew Ms. Moger. Iris Moger's skull-taut face made her age hard to guess, though her vintage was betrayed by shaved eyebrows carefully repenciled into Marlene Dietrich arches of surprise. Iris's clothes had been expensive but were borderline shabby. She bore an indefinable stamp of having been around and seen a thing or two. Sentiment and illusions, especially about men, were not among the lady's emotional luggage. Jo Kittrick suspected that Iris had been a call girl in her time.

They met after Ms. Moger's little flat was burgled for the third time in as many months. Sergeant Kittrick, Crime Prevention Officer at the time, recommended security grilles for the windows, temptingly (if you happened to be a burglar) giving on a dark alley behind one of the district's nastier drinking clubs. Charminster is a cathedral city, but even they have limited British versions of a combat zone. Iris Moger, ignorant Londoner, had managed to settle right in the middle of Charminster's. "I thought the rent was too good to be true," she sighed. When she winced at the cost of making her home safer, Jo Kittrick—dead against regulations—had a quiet word with a hardware store manager who owed favors, and a vulnerable woman got her grilles at cost.

"Don't go telling your friends, or I'll be shot at dawn," Jo warned. "'Haven't got friends," said Iris Moger. Dispelling any suggestion of self-pity by adding with transparent sincerity, "Better off without them." All the same, she became Sergeant Kittrick's friend. Every so often they had dinner at the Bell (mediocre, country hotel cuisine but plenty of it, and nobody hurried you) or Emile's Bistro (a bit showy, smaller portions, better tasting). Ms. Moger tried to stand treat, but Jo always insisted on splitting the bill.

The Bell's restaurant opened off the saloon bar. One evening Iris Moger raised her coffee cup but forgot to sip from it, staring past Jo Kittrick, who asked what ailed her.

"Nothing," and a bright smile. Then: "Okay, something. That guy over there. He worries me, that's all."

Jo craned round as if seeking a waiter. The man was unremarkable. If anything, he evoked her maternal grandfather: wrong side of sixty, wirily meager build, wearing cavalry twill slacks, sports jacket, desert boots, topped off by a flat cap. He was drinking alone and without overt pleasure. As she turned back to her companion,

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the man finished his half pint of bitter and headed for the exit.

Reading Jo's puzzled expression, Iris Moger said, "Probably nothing in it." She was not convincing. Having smoked between courses, she lighted a fresh cigarette. When Iris inhaled, her already hollow cheeks threatened to meet in the middle, but that was normal addictive avidity, not nerves.

"Weird, the way strangers can spill their guts to you about things they might not lay on their nearest and dearest. That feller did it the other day.

"We happened to be at the same bus stop. I've never set eyes on him before, right? Just another punter, too old to be a problem. Then a car went past, traffic was heavy, so it was crawling. The look on his face when he saw the driver . . . must have been the driver, nobody else in the car. Jesus, I'm not the girlie kind, it takes a lot to give me the screaming abdabs, but I was scared. The only other time I saw that look, some guy ended up with his face on the floor but he was still standing up. Not for long, mind." She shuddered, her cheeks imploded again, the cigarette glowed suddenly.

Iris Moger stubbed it out and fumbled for a replacement. "He noticed me noticing him. I tried not to stare, but . . . He blurted out something like, 'That was a murderer just went by. And he's free as air. It's not right.' Then the bus came along. Fellow-me-lad went up to the top deck, I stayed downstairs, thanks very much. In fact, I nearly let it go without me.

"Before you ask, I don't know who the man in the car was, either. But I'll tell you something, Jo. That other chap dreams of killing him. *Needs* to, he'd say." And she added matter-of-factly, "I expect he'll do it, one of these days."

Ms. Moger, listening to herself, pulled a face. "Gawd, hark at the dreama queen! What the hell do I know about anything—must be the gin talking."

Later that night, Sergeant Kittrick returned to the Bell alone. As she hoped, the head barman knew Sports Coat and Flat Cap. Give over, sarge, you kidding me, that cap a tearaway? At his time o' life? Never any trouble with him. The barman named his customer. Jo, having made her interest casual, decided that the solitary drinker seemed a most unlikely menace—more burned-out than burning with lethal rage. Odd . . . for Iris Moger wasn't the fanciful kind. But a little more research in Records and

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among her colleagues forced the conclusion that Iris had overreacted.

Ms. Moger never mentioned the matter again. Eventually she went into hospital, briefly, before meeting the predictable fate of a chain smoker who drank the majority of her nourishment. Not counting the funeral director's crew, Sergeant Josephine Kittrick was the only person who attended the burial service.

But the late Iris Moger had planted and armed what amounted to a time bomb, thanks to the memory. Further, Jo Kittrick grew up as a kid sister to three older brothers, helping them clean and preen a succession of cherished motorbikes and cars. It educated her in the appearance and purpose of any number of different polishes, lubricants, spray paints, and degreasing substances. She never forgot that, either.

Not that this diverse data was systematically stored, then retrieved on command, computer style. The process was haphazard, triggered by another female member of the public, a bit of a pest.

Jo Kittrick was still fairly new in her rank, so Sergeant Gedge, that morning's interface between Wessex constabulary and the outside world, had to be teasing when he landed her with Mrs. Bennington-Bruce.

Gedge tapped at Jo's office door, pokerfaced as a butler yet vaguely gleeful. "This lady wants a senior officer, ma'am, and you're the only one here at the moment." He vanished, leaving Jo secretly furious.

Camilla Bennington-Bruce, middle-aged niece of a former bishop of Charminster, demanded caution. Being affluent, she had the leisure and clout to make a nuisance of herself. Beebee, as everyone called Mrs. Bennington-Bruce behind her ample back, was a rare but not unique specimen of the Establishment: she ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds. Fomented rent strikes, picketed on ecological issues, railed against police brutality, while stroking her county friends—she was a generous hostess and inspired cook—and networking shamelessly to gain leverage for campaigns.

Oh dear, Inspector Kittrick thought, pulling out a chair for the visitor.

But for once, it wasn't trouble. Or not exactly. More of a possible glitch, an anomaly. There had been a fatal accident the previous evening on the Old Swindon Road, which meandered through the hills

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above Charminster. Locals avoided that route, replete with blind corners and tricky bends, generally with drops of between ten and thirty feet on one side. A motorist virtually certainly driving too fast for the conditions—a summer downpour—had sailed off at a sharp bend. Unsuited to air travel, the car crashed and burned in a field. The driver had been incinerated, too. It wasn't his first mishap by a long chalk, merely the crowning folly. So far, so straightforward . . .

"A pig of a road," Mrs. Bennington-Bruce affirmed, "but it's the only way to get to High Creech, my sister lives there. God punishes me for visiting because I ought to instead of by choice—so it always rains when I go."

Jo Kittrick smiled dutifully. She was due in court at eleven, and Beebee threatened to be discursive.

"The rain made me concentrate on the road ahead, else I would have spotted the gap in the hedge where that man went through it. I must have passed only minutes later. Anyway, just before Holland Corner I encountered this stream of milk."

Beebee paused for effect or to marshal her thoughts. "Milk," Inspector Kittrick echoed, nonplussed.

"Well, white and liquid, I didn't stop to taste it," the narrator retorted tartly. "The road slopes at that bend, from side to side, that is, the edge nearest the hill is higher. So whatever this white stuff was, it was flowing across. Couldn't see where it came from—the hillside, or bubbling up from the verge. The stream was quite wide, twice the length of my car. One had wild visions of earth slides, but then I remembered it isn't chalk soil up there. I keep saying milk, that was the look of it, the liquid can't have been very deep. It flew up as I went through, but there was no drag on the wheels—some drops hit the windshield and that was that, the wipers dealt with them. If it hadn't been pelting rain I might have stopped for a proper look. Did wonder if kids had been fooling around, found a churn of milk by the roadside, left for the dairy truck, and spilt it, little hooligans."

"I see."

Beebee smiled surprisingly sweetly; she was nicer than police station griping suggested. "Not yet, you don't. I thought little of it; just tabletalk for my sister, we never know what to say to each other. I told her about the milk, and we chatted about similar weird stuff . . . frogs falling out of the sky,

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snow in August, and so forth. Then I saw the paper this morning . . . "

The Charminster stringer for the Wessex region daily had earned his month's keep with a single story: "Road Horror Riddle of Demon Driver." The horror was real enough; not so the riddle, Inspector Kittrick nearly warned her.

"If there is some mystery about that accident, then my stream of milk might be relevant," said Mrs. Bennington-Bruce. "Accordingly, I phoned here, and after interminable hanging on and pillar-to-posting, some deeply stupid little man called me a liar. Implied as much, at any rate. Police were on the scene shortly after the crash, road surface was normal, no milk there."

Horse face hardening, Beebee declared, "I don't suffer from delusions, my eyesight is fine, I am by way of being a trained observer. Daddy was a painter—Royal Academy, not a Sunday dauber—and he taught me to look, analyze, remember.

"Now, I haven't the faintest idea where the milk, water, whatever it was, fits in. If at all. But I deplore people demanding rights without responsibilities. So I'm doing my duty, telling the proper authority . . . that idiot man on the phone doesn't count. If a formal statement is needed, phone my secretary, and I'll toddle round and sign one. Good morning to you."

Chris Dally supplied the next prompt. Detective-sergeant Dally exasperated Jo Kittrick by looking such a fine, upstanding young man and showing enough intelligence to shirk at least twenty-five percent of what she demanded of him. All that potential being sabotaged at the source irked her.

Her dislike was compounded by the fact that Chris Dally had to be handled with care. He played rugby for the police, and there was talk (encouraged by himself, no doubt) of an England cap in the offing. The assistant chief constable, obsessed by Force Image, had assured Inspector Kittrick, "Your sergeant is a prime asset." Earning a demure nod and mental agreement with only the first three letters of the comment's final word.

When she told Sergeant Dally to look into the crash at Holland Corner, he produced a martyred-patronizing expression. His specialty was lawyerly defense in depth, line after line of barbed wire. It wasn't a C.I.D. case; if it was, then he had other duties outstanding; and failing that excuse, the task was futile anyway. "Forensics will take care

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of the car and the clown who wrote himself off. No witnesses, and house-to-house checks won't turn any up, boss. Precious few houses out that way. The original alert came from a forest warden who saw the smoke from miles off, got a fix on it, and sent Road Motor Patrol searching."

Inspector Kittrick unfolded her giant-scale map of Charminster and district, snapping, "Shift yourself, Chris," as she spread it across two desks.

"Right, here's the Old Swindon Road and . . . yes, here is Holland Corner. Goodness, G. K. Chesterton was right. . . ." Sergeant Dally looked blank. " 'The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road,' " Jo quoted abstractedly. "Fourteen miles connect places eight miles apart. Holland Farm is just beyond the bend, and here's a market garden with owner's cottage, right on the worst bit of curve, that's where Havilland finished up—hope the strawberries survived. . . . East of the highway, just before the bend, two bungalows. Ah, and another, farther away but near as dammit overlooking the crash site."

Before Chris Dally could string more barbed wire, she turned to the bookcase and yanked out a plump ring-binder. "Electoral register, in case this map is out of date, missed any new buildings . . . Here we go, Old Swindon Road, Number One is Cornelius Adamson, smallholder, that must be the market garden. And the bungalows, three more addresses, plus the farm, so the map is accura—"

Her voice trailed off. Inspector Kittrick had taken in one resident's name. The small print danced: she was listening to Iris Moger's tale of a man aching to kill. And she put that together with the dead driver of a car gone out of control; then remembered playing the garden hose over the cylinder fins of brother Mike's beloved BSA Road Rocket, a bike deserving its name. These mental flashes were finished in a couple of seconds.

"Crikey," Jo mumbled inadequately. *"Milk!"*

The kaleidoscope of times past had just tumbled into a new pattern. She knew what Mrs. Bennington-Bruce had driven through on the Old Swindon Road. Beebee was not lying about her powers of observation, but she had not seen milk.

"You all right?" Chris Dally was sitting down with a defiant air of permanence. "Not all that near the crash site, any of those places," he whined.

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Inspector Kittrick emerged from her reverie. "Very well, you can stay put." She wiped the grin off his face by dumping the yellow pages and an encyclopedia-sized business directory onto his blotter.

"Hit the phone to every garage and motor-trade factor between here and Bristol, here and Salisbury. The magic word is Gunk and—"

"Did you say Gunk?" he broke in, wary of another of her sarcastic jokes.

"It's a trade name, Chris." Didn't he know anything? "Second thoughts, forget Gunk, tell them water-soluble cleanser for engines and metalwork in general. Some literal-minded jerk may deny all knowledge, just because our target bought similar stuff under a different brand name. Have they sold anything of that nature recently, in bulk? Obviously they will have, but this customer couldn't show a business card or garage letterhead and get a professional discount."

"Supposing one of them says yes?"

"Get a description of the customer. He'll have used a false name, but collect the paperwork anyway. He'd never be daft enough to use his credit card, more's the pity. Worst case scenario is he didn't risk getting the stuff at a wholesaler's, bought individual cans—half the filling stations in Wessex sell it in forecourt shops—and stockpiled them. But that would take time; the standard retail cans are small. With luck, chummy didn't have the patience to play supersafe."

She went off at a tangent. "Sure you've never heard of Gunk? Slosh it over the muckiest engine block, add water, and the clag and filth melt away like magic, it's terrific stuff."

Sergeant Dally said airily, "Pru looks after cleaning the car, gardening, and suchlike. I'm too busy." Pru was his adoring wife, a tiny woman whose demonic energy would have fueled two or three of her husband's breed.

Jo nodded sardonically. "You amaze me. Get cracking on this, please." Chris Dally consulted his watch. Budget squeezed, the Wessex force discouraged needless overtime. Inspector Kittrick had been in court half the day, it was past four in the afternoon.

"All right then, action tomorrow. Make this office a rugger talk-free zone till you finish, Chris. You can start now anyway." He didn't ask what it was all about; too busy exploring the trade directory with the underwater slowness of a deep sea

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diver fighting stubborn currents.

Being human, therefore petty on occasion, Jo Kittrick felt an illogical stab of defeat along with elation the following morning. She bustled into the C.I.D. room ready to put spurs and whip to him, but Chris Dally foiled the hassling by giving her a neatly typed memo. "There we are, boss. Abda Motor Parts, a discount place just off the motorway, Swindon outskirts. Subject bought sixty liters of degreasing fluid, three drums of it, last month. Paid cash, told 'em not to bother with a receipt. That helped them remember him, along with it being an unusually big purchase for a private buyer. Abda gets mainly trade business; garages run accounts with them, and mechanics turn up with order sheets."

"How did you get his name, then?" It was a name she had expected, but Jo was startled by such swift confirmation.

"Reason is, one of the Abda forklift operators recognized this fellow from the 1950's, bit of a local hero back then. Mr. Fork Lift bored his workmates rigid for the rest of the day over having a celebrity on the premises. I made 'em put this chap on the phone, and he's adamant about who he saw. Make a good witness."

"Well done," Inspector Kittrick acknowledged with a slight effort. "You really got your skates on." For a change . . .

Chris Dally smirked. "No sweat, it was the second call I made. Chummy was dead considerate, picking a supplier starting with an A. Call me lucky, eh?" She could think of other descriptions, but he had come up with the goods.

"Great," Superintendent Gaizlee growled, meaning precisely the opposite. "You want the inquest adjourned as soon as evidence of identification has been given, then at least two weeks for further inquiries." Gaizlee was tough, a blusterer, but with a broad streak of compassion; he had a thing about inquests, wanted them done-and-dusted with speed. Easier on people left behind, he felt. Jo Kittrick, knowing the strain imposed on shaken wives or desolated husbands hearing harsh evidence, could not quarrel with that.

Neither could she explain exactly why more time was needed before the coroner was allowed to record the inevitable—and wrong—verdict on Arthur Jamie Havilland. Superintendent Gaizlee would go critical in every sense of the term, raging against female in-

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tuition and theories grabbed out of thin air, not to mention the back of Inspector Kittrick's mind. Though Bert Gaizlee would say "alleged mind." He could be as sarcastic to her as she was to egregious Sergeant Dally, except that the superintendent preferred bludgeon to rapier.

When weak, exploit the opponent's fears . . . "Frankly, sir, I'm worried about Mrs. Bennington-Bruce's intervention. Bearing her track record in mind." She brought the superintendent up to speed on Beebee's bizarre sighting.

"Bloody hell, streams of milk. Road Motor Patrol saw no sign of anything untoward on the road, you say? She'll report pink elephants next, maybe the woman's a secret drinker." He sounded hopeful. "If she wasn't so friendly with members of Parliament, I would treat her the same as any other crank: flea in the ear, and prosecution for wasting police time if that hint wasn't taken."

"But I assume you want me to go through the motions of checking Mrs. B's story, sir—in case she checks on us. Appear to ignore her information and she's quite capable of getting the Home Office on our backs."

"Too ruddy right." Gaizlee squinted balefully. "But I'm damned if the inquest will be held up too long on that account. Havilland was a rotten specimen of humanity, but that's no reason for his wife and kids to suffer. Today's newspaper rubbish must have hurt, dragging up his past. Get them keyed up for the inquest, only to send them home with it all to do again in a week or so? We're not in business to crucify innocent bystanders."

"What worries me, sir, is that Mrs. Bennington-Bruce is categorical about something being on that road where Havilland went over. Maybe it affected his car, maybe not. There's no harm in establishing the truth, and every advantage. We'd look silly, er, it would be unfortunate if the inquest called it accidental death . . . a day or two before we proved otherwise."

Gaizlee, a bulky man, made the chair creak as he leaned forward. "Come back to the real world, inspector, the air down here is breathable. *What* blasted otherwise could there be?" His voice rose. "That's a widowmaker of a road at the best of times. Havilland crashed during a monsoon after a hot, dry spell—in other words, he took liberties on a skating rink. That's why traffic slows when it rains: prudent people drive extra carefully.

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"Nobody ever mistook Jamie Havilland for prudent, though. The man was a compulsive road hog. Convictions for driving without due care, driving under the influence, dangerous driving. Before your time, he nearly went to prison. Should have, for my money. Had a skinful of drink and killed a little girl walking home from ballet classes, in Chapter House Lane. Claimed he swerved to avoid a stray dog, lost control. Havilland made sure witnesses saw him swig brandy from a flask he had in the car straight afterwards. Swore it was his first of the day, taken to steady his nerves. That sabotaged the alcohol test, it's an old trick."

Superintendent Gaizlee grunted disgustedly. "Smart lawyer softsoaped the court: his client must live with this for the rest of his life, no punishment could match what Havilland would impose on himself. Havilland paid a fine and lost his license for three years. Appealed for it back after eighteen months, which was his right. Road Motor Patrol pulled him doing eighty in a thirty mph zone near a school the following month—so much for contrition. Point is, the Chapter House Lane incident was a carbon copy of the fatal crash. He was going too fast, couldn't handle the consequences, simple as that."

Inspector Kittrick remained silent.

Gaizlee snarled, "I thought you had more sense than to believe what you read in the papers. Mystery, my foot! All right, check it out. But I'm not having the inquest adjourned because of an old biddy's tall story. I will—against my better judgment—have the coroner postpone it until Monday, that's seventy-two hours. Seventy more than you need for a wild goose chase. Come Monday, the inquest goes ahead, open and shut; then Havilland's family can get on with collecting the life insurance. I dare say he left them skint."

Jo stifled the urge to say that she knew all about Jamie Havilland's bad driving. Shut up, she had got what she wanted. Inspector Kittrick generally did. That and diehard sexism accounted for the superintendent's invariable touchiness around her.

Following the shoulder of Restharrow Hill like the slipping strap of a fat diva's gown, the road ran in one of those deceptively gentle, go-on-forever curves before tightening into a buttonhook bend. The late Jamie Havilland had driven

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along the shallow arc of the buttonhook's handle, failed to follow the sudden turn, and hurtled into space.

Sun on her bare head tempered by the constant uplands breeze, Jo Kittrick stepped into the hedge's torn gap. The market garden lay some fifteen feet below. Map and electoral register had misled, for the place was abandoned, once cultivated ground conquered by weeds. The cottage might be at the back of beyond, but vandals had still found it, smashing windows and spraying a National Front symbol on the nailed-shut front door.

No potential eyewitnesses living there. Where Havilland's car had landed, a charred patch stood out among rampant nettles and bindweed. Tire marks and furrows showed where the wreckage had been winched aboard a low-loader for dispatch to the Wessex Forensic Center, and an ambulance took the human debris away. Jo estimated that the car had flown fifty yards or more, and experienced a twinge of driver's empathy making her sense the terror and helplessness involved.

Gripping a rowan sapling for anchorage, she leaned out over the gap. Directly below, in a fan shape spreading for yards on either side, nettles and broad-leaved dock plants were sickly, wilting. "Good," Jo muttered; nothing more to be done here for the moment. If forced to —and providing she could sell her concept to Bert Gaizlee, which was a large assumption—earth and foliage samples would be taken, the whole area cordon-searched. Her target had been careless over buying the stuff; it was just possible that he had thrown the empty containers into those weeds. A junkyard could be hidden beneath the sea of vegetation.

Back on the roadway, she cricked her neck to admire the summit of Restharrow Hill, a whaleback of tussocky grass, clots of yellow gorse blossom vivid under white clouds that gave the illusion of the hill moving, toppling, while they kept still. Pretty now, pretty hellish in winter, bleak as Siberia, Inspector Kittrick decided. And La Bennington-Bruce hadn't seen a stream of milk, with or without honey—no dairy farming went on in these parts. Sturdy yeomen raised cash crops of tents or caravans on camping grounds the far side of the hill. Sheep weren't worth the trouble, arable was out of the question with such poor land, tilting so sharply. She had noticed a flock of goats several miles back, but goats

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will eat anything and don't mind scrambling.

The voice, coming out of nowhere as she delved into her purse, startled Jo. "It's a quiet road, this, but stand in the middle long enough, you will get squashed flat as pastry, with a big lorry for the rolling pin."

She looked around. The speaker, perched on a fieldstone boundary wall, was inspecting her from the other side of the road. If Puck's traditional costume were torn corduroy trousers, collarless shirt, and a Panama hat with its brim frayed, then the old fellow qualified as Puckish: bright eyes, impish smile. The tramp outfit meant nothing, for a lot of English hobby gardeners dress like living scarecrows. "It'll do for the garden," is the philosophy saving disgraceful rags from their rightful home in the trashcan.

This scarecrow declared mock-solemnly, "The One Above Sees All." And less playfully, "If you're a reporter, save your breath. Don't know nuffin', wouldn't tell if I did."

Fishing the address list from her purse, Jo crossed the still empty road and displayed her I.D. card. "You must be Mr. Virgo."

Less than impressed, he said comfortably, "Long as you're not from Wessex Water Board. There's a hosepipe ban 'cause of the drought, see, but stuck out here on my ownsome, who can catch me? Hate letting flowers go thirsty. Come on up, my dear."

Grass and feathery cow parsley grew so lushly along the roadside that only now did Jo Kittrick spy steps amid the greenery. A ladder-steep ascent brought her to wide, narrow terraces rising in an enormous staircase of trim lawns and flowerbeds blazing with color.

The scarecrow impression returned when Mr. Virgo shook her hand. His fingers were thin and dry as twigs. "I 'spect it's about the accident. Wasn't kidding just now . . . never saw anything."

"Surely you heard something, though?"

Virgo cupped a hand behind one ear. "Pardon?" He twinkled at her again. "Just my fun, I'm not that deaf. But I did have the TV blaring—it was a war film, lots of explosions. Now you've come this far, stop for a cuppa, the kettle is on. This way . . ."

Following him, Jo understood why the bungalow, set back in a natural cup of the hillside, was invisible from the road. "Mind the hose," the old man warned over his shoulder just as she stumbled on a loop of

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the green plastic snake basking on the grass.

"You must need miles of it to reach the bottom of your garden."

"And don't I have fun getting it rolled up right after a watering session." Mr. Virgo chuckled hollowly. "My life is ruled by blessed hoses. Got a big feller for the central heating oil—the tanker truck has to pump it from down there on the road. Only happens a couple of times a year, but it's a performance. Driver's an idle young devil, expects me to haul the pipe down for him, lock it on, and so forth. Wear the old 'uns out first, that's his motto. Mixed blessing, being king of the castle."

"Nowhere for you to keep your car, either," she sympathized.

"Don't drive. Seeing what happened t'other night, maybe it's just as well." Mr. Virgo waved her to a rustic bench beside the bungalow's front door. "Shan't be a tick."

The view was splendid, a vista of the valley with its meadows and, in the foreground, the serpentine course of the Old Swindon Road. The one above saw a lot from here, if not all. . . .

Better than his word, he returned with a bowl of strawberries as well as the tea. "What a treat! Thanks very much, not drinking on duty can't apply to tea Mr. Virgo, you're hiding your light under a bushel—'Don't drive,' indeed! Any amount of prizes and trophies say otherwise."

"Back in the knife box, Miss Sharp!" Head on one side, he grinned delightedly. "Fancy you knowing that, it was back in the dark ages when racing cars didn't look like spaceships. I was no Fangio nor Stirling Moss, just the only Charminster chap who had a go at racing. Said I don't drive, by the by, never said I *couldn't*. Gave it up five, six years ago."

Finally old Virgo decided to be anxious. "Here, have you been checking up on me? What am I supposed to be guilty of?"

She ate a strawberry, delicious. "Being a Charbury celebrity, I suppose. As somebody said to me recently, just my fun. I read about you in the paper once, a Those Were the Days piece. Look, I have to talk to everyone living around here, in case there is a witness. I know you missed the actual accident, but maybe you came outside after the rain stopped, saw something out of the ordinary . . . This is a terrific vantage point."

"It was getting dark," he reminded her. Bristles rasped as his knobbly hand rubbed his

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jaw. "Something fishy about that bloke running out of road, then?"

Inspector Kittrick shrugged. "Who knows? My boss wants it checked and doublechecked. I don't make the rules, just follow them."

Virgo pulled the disintegrating Panama harder down on his head. "Young Havilland was a danger to everybody, hisself included. Way he went scorching along that road, night after night, it was a wonder it took him so long to come atumble."

She leaned forward. "He was using that route regularly before his death?" This was new to her.

"Not half. Mind you, I didn't know it was him till the paper said. Knew the car, though, saw it many a time. Summer, I'm in the garden till it gets too dark to potter about. That Rover of his would roar past two, three nights a week. Wrong side of the road at the bends, often as not. That's what made me notice. Sometimes I could watch him from a couple of miles that way—" the old man gestured towards Charminster, slopping tea on his trousers unheedingly "—to right below me. By gum, it would make your hair curl! He was asking for trouble, cutting blind corners, driving on his brakes. I badly wanted to have a word with the chump, but what's the use? Nobody listens to a back number, all you'd get for advice is a mouthful of abuse—"

"How long ago did you start noticing him?" she butted in.

Virgo thought about that. "Month or so. Didn't always see him, but you could tell when he went by. Tires squealing, as well they might, and his tappets needed seeing to, rattling away like Mum's sewing machine." He wagged a finger. "I can tell you where he was going if that helps. Worked it out; you think a lot, following a lawnmower round for hour after hour.

"See, there's no traffic to speak of, down below. So what there is stands out. After a while I tumbled . . . Big yellow Jag would go down the road towards town. Lousy color, lovely motor, nought to sixty in the time it takes to blow your nose. Mr. Radley's car, drives it like a hearse. He bought Holland Farm in '76 after Jim Perrins went bust, poor devil. Yellow Jag means Radley's off for the evening, Mrs. Radley with him because she always is. Half an hour later, never longer, Havilland comes tearing along in the opposite direction. Going to Holland Farm. The nanny there loves the Radley nippers, looks after them a treat. But

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skirt up to here, blouse down to there, she's a flighty hussy. What's more, I seen Havilland and her in Charminster, heads together and not only their heads. What I reckoned, soon as the Radleys left her to baby-sit, the sly little tart would ring her fancy man, and he couldn't wait to—" Mr. Virgo pulled himself up, blushing. "Um, get his feet under the table," he finished primly.

Jo Kittrick was nodding. Virgo made a wry face. "Get a bit of company and I can't stop talking. Sorry, miss."

"Don't apologize, it's fascinating. Frustrating, too—Murphy's Law! If you couldn't see him, you still heard him . . . Except the night Havilland got himself killed."

"It was raining, no call for me to be in the garden. I didn't see the Radleys' Jag go by, neither, but I bet it did."

"Otherwise Havilland would have stayed away," she agreed. "And it *had* to be raining, of course. Everything had to come together . . . Rain, Mr. and Mrs. Radley out of the way, a clear road, Jamie Havilland in a tearing hurry."

"You've lost me, my dear." He lifted the tea cosy, tested the pot's temperature, and, reassured, poured her another cup. Fishing for compliments, he asked, "Have I been of help?"

Jo, hands folded in her lap, didn't take the cup. She closed her eyes momentarily, sun warm on the lids, before giving him full attention. "Help me some more. Starting with why you killed him, Mr. Virgo."

"What was that?" he squeaked.

"You heard. You've wanted Havilland dead for years. The strange part is, somebody told me—but you took your time, so I thought it was a false alarm. What was it about, what had he done to you?"

Virgo, unaware of what he was doing, started sipping from her cup, his own unheeded on the tray set between them on the rustic bench. "Have you gone mad, woman?"

"Let's save time, cut the corners, same as Jamie Havilland used to. You knew that several evenings a week he would drive round Holland Corner, that you could spot him from a long way off, establish that no cars were following, and be reasonably confident that nothing would appear from the other direction. Nobody to see what the king of the castle was up to.

"When weather conditions permitted, you ran the pipe from your fuel tank, over there on the patio, down the garden to the road and let it run. Until

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oil coated the surface like ice, only more slippery. Twenty miles an hour would be too fast once the boobytrap was ready, and I dare say Havilland was doing twice that. The best driver on earth, which he wasn't, had no chance, losing traction on a bad bend. If the car hadn't burned, I suppose you were ready to nip down with a spanner and finish him off, gambling that any injuries would be attributed to the accident.

"The fire was a bonus. Gave you more time to clean the oil off, restore the road to normal. I worked this out backwards, you know—I guessed what you cleaned up with, and that told me what you were getting rid of. We have a witness who thought she'd driven through milk, a sheet of it on the road. It was degreasing fluid—brown stuff, looks like creosote. Paint it on an engine, hose it down with water, and it turns milky white and runs off; all that's left is clean, shiny metal. Or clean, shiny road surface, just the way it should be on a rainy evening. You couldn't paint it on, so you sloshed cans of cleaner on that oil slick and used your garden hose to spray it away.

"He had to be ambushed on a rainy night. Extensive wet section on a dry road? Somebody would ask why. But hosing down a wet road . . . that was hiding a leaf in a forest."

Virgo produced a rusty-hinge laugh of derision. "Rubbish. Why me, anyway? Say it *was* done that way . . . could have been anyone. I didn't even know the man, except by reputation, that's a fact."

"Your garden is the only one right above the bend. Nobody else could bring that much oil from a distance or clear it away so fast—the logistics are impossible." Inspector Kittrick raised a hand. "Hear me out. Staff at the garage supplies house will testify to you buying enough cleaning fluid to deal with a dozen cars, though you don't own one. We'll get the heating fuel firm to produce their records. Chances are you laid in your winter supply recently because it's cheaper if you buy in summer, they give off-peak discount. Your last delivery will be on their computer, and we'll compare that total against the present contents of your tank. From the look on your face, a lot will be missing. . . . Tell the jury you kept your radiators blasting away during a heat wave, they might buy it. But when we take samples from the market garden and show that a strip of land beside the road is polluted by heating oil and oil solvent, it's going to be a hard

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sell. What's more, when the forensics team know what to look for, traces of heating oil and degreaser on the wreck, they'll probably find something. Comments?"

With a spark of his original spirit, Mr. Virgo grumbled, "You sound like a schoolmarm." His tongue worried at his dentures, making the bottom set protrude for an instant. "You are supposed to tell me everything I say will be taken down and used against me."

"May be given in evidence," Jo amended. "Pay attention, I shan't say this twice. In your own interests, come back to Charminster with me and make a full and voluntary admission. Consult a solicitor first, by all means—he will give the same advice. Have you got a solicitor?"

"Hold hard, hold hard. I'm admissioning nothing." Mr. Virgo cleared his throat and gave her a sideways look. "Since you ask, a lawyer called Henty handled things when I bought this place, but it was years ago."

"Dick Henty that would be. He's sound."

"Never mind that." Mr. Virgo was gripping the bench hard enough to make its dry bark squeak. "You dreamed this up all on your own, nobody else knows yet, am I right?"

"Wrong," Inspector Kittrick lied briskly. "Try something stupid, I shall make mincemeat of you; even if I couldn't, think it through. Running isn't the most sensible way of addressing the trouble you're in."

"Not up to running these days. You've got a nasty mind, for a bonny girl." He gazed out over the valley. "But if you are the only one who's got this fantastic notion . . . "

Inspector Kittrick let him flounder, needing him to talk while dreading a bribe in the offing. Virgo thumped his chest. "I'm on my last lap, that ought to count. Ticker's no good any more. I shan't be here this time next year. Ask my doctor, I'm not spinning a yarn."

Now he did meet her eyes. "I used to think if you knew your number was up, life wouldn't matter, turn to dust and ashes. It's not like that. The little time I have left is precious."

"Jamie Havilland could have said the same. You robbed him of a lot of time, and his children of their father."

"He deserved what he got!" the old man shouted. Subsiding, Virgo's hands knotted. "Not that I'm admitting anything. What are you up to? Coming here, letting on it was routine, just to set me up, frame me . . . "

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Jo Kittrick got up. "God knows why, but I'm giving you a break. I made a routine visit, asking if you knew anything about the accident, and you volunteered a confession. A good QC can use that to your advantage. Along with your age, it could affect the sentence."

"Huh! So I die in prison three years before I was supposed to get out, instead of ten." Virgo fiddled with the deplorable hat, tugging straw from its brim. His whiskery jaw set, but the lower lip wobbled. "It's a bluff, missy. I can deny the whole thing, let's see you prove it."

"We've done that bit," she said tiredly. "Come on, you left a track like a herd of elephants. We'd better be on our way, catch your solicitor before he goes home."

Though she had not pressed the question, Jo was still curious. In the car, as if reading her mind, Virgo muttered, "Far as the solicitor chap and the judge and all the rest are concerned, I went off my head. Got sick of road hogs and set out to teach one a lesson. First come, first served. Happened to be Havilland."

"I don't believe that."

"We're on our ownsome," said Virgo. "Repeat what I tell you, and I shall only deny it. But I won't have you thinking I am a monster. That kiddie Havilland knocked down? My granddaughter. Wrong side of the blanket, the child's mother has no idea I am her father. *Her* mum was my bit on the side, if you want to be nasty. I know better. Sally kept me going when we were both unhappy. A good woman! Which is why they'll never get it out of me, why I hated him. I shall swear on the Bible I just made an example of a reckless driver. True, but there was more to it.

"It was bad enough that Havilland killed the little girl. But when I found out what an animal he was, it drove me near crazy. One time I heard him in a pub, bragging how he drove better drunk than sober . . . something had to be done. But there I was, old and useless, and him a big bloke, looked like he could handle himself. Excuses, I knew that all along, I didn't have the guts. Hating him for what he did and how he acted after, but finding reasons to put it off."

Virgo was talking to himself, the words happened to be aloud. "A proper man would just have done it, and damn the torpedoes . . . Not me, bloody weakling. I kept tabs on him but couldn't do the business. Then the quack starts treating me like a kid, and dim into the bargain: I'm elderly, ought to get my affairs in order, my time

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of life. Take a good holiday, pamper myself while I can. By chance, ha ha, this is after she sends me to Charminster General for tests. 'I fought in the war before you were born,' I told her; 'knowing when I shall die in my bed isn't going to scare me, so how long have I got?' "

Again the rusty hinge grated. " 'Course, it did knock the stuffing out of me, I was bloody terrified, first off. Came home in a dream. But you get used to anything. What preyed on me was setting my affairs in order. They weren't, see. Couldn't be in order, long as that man was alive. It seemed providential when he started seeing that girl at Holland Farm. Aye, providence telling me to put up or shut up. I reckon I got the message, don't you."

"Astonishing good health," Superintendent Gaizlee intoned, raising his tumbler of scotch to Jo Kittrick. A couple of days after her encounter with Mr. Virgo, the superintendent had marched her off to the Conservative Club—no political significance, just his favorite off-duty den—"to rinse the dust from our throats after the heat and clamor of the day."

Inspector Kittrick, dust-clearing with a little Campari and much soda, nodded warily.

Bert Gaizlee brooded over his next speech. "Human nature: I loathe and detest that Bennington-Bruce woman, therefore opposed, rejected, anything she proposed. Should have recalled that even stopped clocks are right twice a day. I very nearly told you to stop crying over spilt milk." An expectant pause. "That was a play on words. It made Mrs. Gaizlee laugh," he reproached her.

"Sorry, sir, slow of me not to catch on. I knew you felt I was wrong to delay the inquest—but when Beebee mentioned milk, I made the connection with cleaning fluid, and that started the brainbox working. It was so offbeat I was scared to tell you what I had in mind." As for the seed of the investigation, Iris Moger's hunch, Jo had no intention of revealing that. Ever. Making the superintendent admit that one woman had succeeded thanks to two more of them would be cruel and unusual punishment for a male chauvinist.

"Hmm. Obliging of Virgo to give you a confession before you asked." The superintendent shook his head before she could speak. "That's how it is on the record, enough said. We all have our own way of doing things. I understand the old lunatic is terminally ill, may not

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make it to trial. Some folk would say that aforesaid trial, and our investigation leading to it, are a waste of time and public money."

"But you wouldn't agree, sir."

"Of course not. Start denying judge and jury the chance to have their say, no matter how good the reasons seem, then we might as well go and sit in a ditch. Forget The Job and let anarchy rip. Besides which . . . uncovering that lunatic was exceptionally good work, and I think the better of you for it."

Poise lost at last, Jo choked on her Campari.

Offended, hurt, Gaizlee proffered a snowily laundered handkerchief. "No call to be so startled. I can seem a wee bit blunt, very rarely and always under provocation—doesn't mean I lack appreciation for my officers."

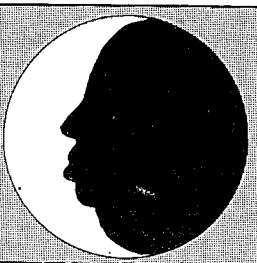
Dabbing her chin, Inspector Kittrick ventured, "With respect, old Virgo's no lunatic . . ."

"Aha! Back to form, arguing the toss. He's a well-adjusted citizen, eh? I'm all for road safety, but not by means of knocking off everybody who breaks a speed limit. The man is unbalanced, any fool can see that."

What she did see, in a vivid mental picture, was Virgo's hand twisting the seat belt as they drove down Restharrow Hill towards the city, while he spoke of his secret child, and that daughter's child.

There is a time to speak and a time to refrain from speaking . . . Inspector Kittrick looked properly abashed. "I do have a terrible habit of arguing for the sake of it. You're absolutely right, sir, and I am well out of order. Virgo had to be crazy, else why would he do a thing like that?"

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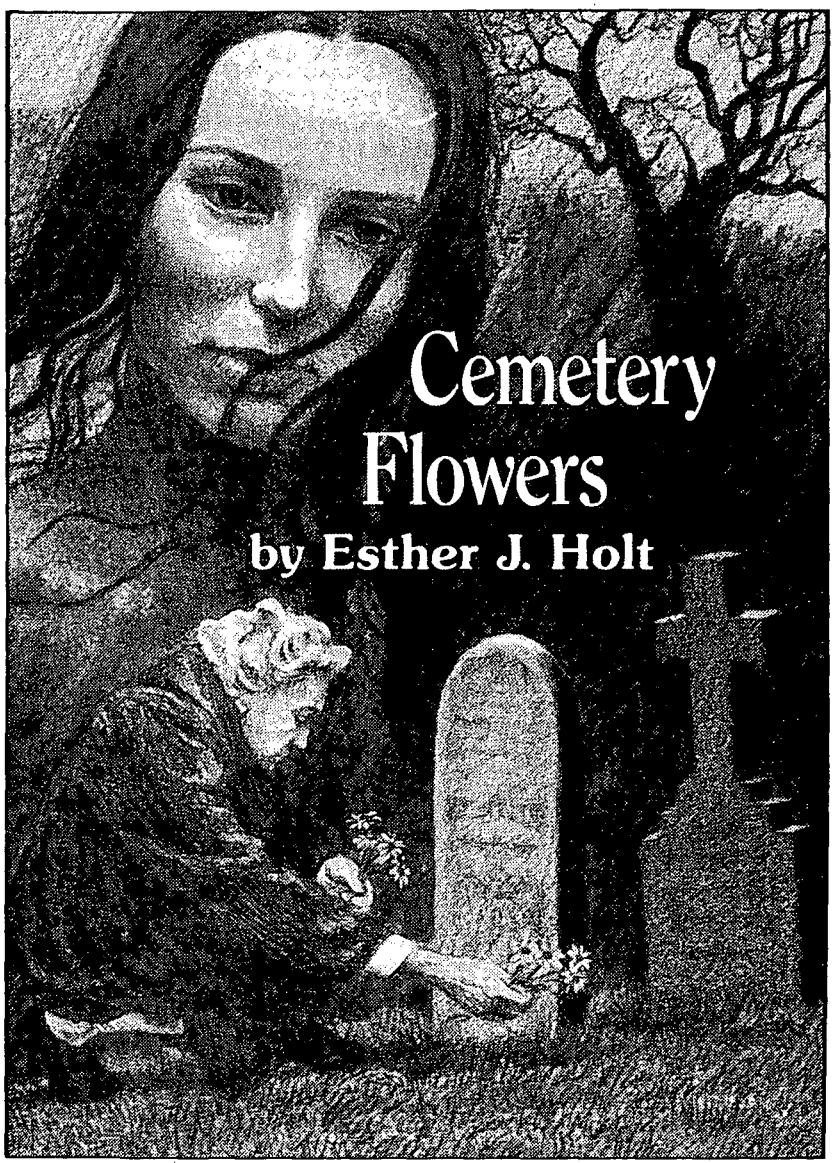
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FICTION



Cemetery Flowers

by Esther J. Holt

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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Callie, dear, I walked to the cemetery today. Only another old person like me would understand when I say how beautiful it looked.

Remember all those walks to the cemetery? All the familiar names, the shapes of the tombstones. When we took visiting cousins there for the first time, they thought we were strange.

Who could have fun in a cemetery? All those ghosts and . . .

I stand here now and wonder why I'm here and how you got there. Oh, I know the *how*. You understand what I mean.

We did have fun in the cemetery in the shade of the spreading oak trees. The tea sets we made from acorns. That odd, flat-topped tombstone of the Goodeys made a perfect table. Momma said those two had more fights across the table. It was only fitting that their stone—she called it a marker—should look like a table.

I took the walk but not directly from the farmhouse. From the car. I drove over from Cates Corner. I parked as near the house as I could without trespassing. Afterward, when my journey is done, I'll let the family know where I've been, but I suspect they'll know already. Reading the stones was like greeting old friends. I missed you, Callie.

I never told you how glad I was to have you there. The older girls treated us both like bubble-headed babies. You'll be glad to know we all became friends when we were grownups with families.

I never told you mostly because I forgot when you hadn't been there. It was like we were born together even though there was four months' difference in our ages.

Momma. Remember Momma, Callie? Of course you do. She was the reason you came. You needed her, and then she was yours, too. You slipped so often into calling her Momma no one ever noticed when you stopped calling her Auntie. How calm she was. Even in the middle of the night when one of us was sick she moved, slow and calm, getting things done better than any fast-moving person.

The only time she moved fast, and I still laugh about that, was the time you brought her the daisies. Yes, I laugh till I get the hiccups. And, no, I still won't take half the blame. Not when *you* caused what happened just by acting strange, drawing your eyes down and talking like something just come out of the grave.

Those daisies, such an armload of them, went flying all over the kitchen, all because she thought they were cemetery flowers. Dad found some behind the refrigerator when he went to paint back there. He just shook his head.

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Daddy shook his head a lot over us, but he never asked questions. He was afraid of what he might hear, I guess. Maybe he shook his head because he had five children, counting you, and not a son among them.

Callie, you should see that old marker that's shaped like a church steeple. Someone put a bell where there never was one as long as we played there.

We always wondered about that one. Remember? The one with a family member on each side, the momma and daddy, a son and a daughter. The daughter had a different last name. If she was married, where was her husband put to rest? Did the graves point in four different directions like the names? How close they must have felt to each other.

I never come home for Decoration Day. Too many old people still saying, "Poor Callie. What a thing to have happen. Right here, too."

They have no idea how they stir things up in my heart. I was the one with you when it happened, don't they know. I see it all over again, your face . . . no, no one alive knows it all. Only me. I was the only one who ever knew.

Momma and the cemetery daisies. I can't stop smiling. If anyone should come along and see an old lady standing in the middle of a graveyard with a silly grin on her face, what must they think? That she'd found her place at last? That she's just waiting for someone to lay her down?

The daisies don't grow on the Cupperson lot these days, Callie. You'll love this. The daisies the old folks coaxed to grow there to save them work and money putting in greenhouse plants have been replaced by geraniums, tiger lilies, roses in shades your Aunt Cassie, if you ever had an Aunt Cassie, wouldn't wear on her hat. All plastic—all selected and harvested from a discount department store counter. Beautiful!

When Momma didn't believe where we got the daisies, we took her and showed her the field out beyond the barn so white with them. I remember how the two of you held hands, Callie. I wasn't jealous. I'd rather run and jump, always holding out my arms so the wind could pick me up and carry me off. I didn't weigh so much then.

I wanted to stay in that perfect place where the daisies grew and I got to churn butter, creamy and yellow, and gather beautiful brown eggs. At the same time, I wanted to take off from the top of

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the hill. I wanted to hug the world!

You liked being with Momma, Callie. I did, too, but I took it for granted that she'd always be there. You didn't. I guess it was because you were nobody's child. Where *did* you come from, Callie dear? No one ever said. People forgot you hadn't always been there. You looked like the rest of us. Where, Callie? Did you know?

Uncle Baker, Momma's baby brother, used to fuss over you, I remember. Maybe you were one of his mistakes. Were you, Callie? He never did take a wife.

The lilac bushes in the yard have become trees. I wish I could be around to put lilacs on Momma's grave, just strew them out like a purple blanket. She loved them so. They wouldn't let me put a bush on our lot. The roots would get under the markers and lift them right out, they said. So then why do oak trees still shade some of the graves?

The house doesn't look any different, still gray weathered. I discovered it's been sided so it will always look gray weathered. The barn's been painted. The new owners care.

The woman invited me into the front room. I should say rooms. They opened the two front rooms with the stairs going up the middle. It looks more country than our things did. I guess that's what they want. Rustic. Momma had a house full of rustic and didn't know it.

I could see into the kitchen. Everything is painted in the old colors the way our stuff was to cover the worn places. There's even a drum churn like Momma's but probably not Momma's. Someone in the family got that. Nothing went to strangers except the farm itself. Our farming bloodline ran out, I guess.

I loved churning, the rhythm of it, shaping the butter. I liked hanging out clothes, too, on days when the blue sky seemed endless and the clouds hung like wool batting. When the other girls had all married off and left, hanging clothes was my job. You hated hanging clothes, didn't you, Callie? *And* churning. When I come to think of it, there wasn't much you liked about the farm. Much as you clung to Momma and me, you wanted more.

You used to lie in bed and look out at the stars, wishing, wishing. If you were Uncle Baker's child, you had his wandering in you. I dreaded the day when I'd wake and be alone in that room. Remember how, even when we had our pick of rooms, we stayed together? Even so, I knew I wouldn't stop you, couldn't stop you, when the time came for you to go.

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I did think that maybe if you fell in love with a local boy, he could keep you there. I saw only the romance of it—never the way courting ends—marrying and leaving the family home. I'd lose you either way.

We both discovered Romance about the same time. Now our talks at the cemetery were filled with Boys. I wonder if Momma ever felt left out. If one of us hadn't been there, then the other one would have talked with her. We'd learned a long time back that very little surprised her.

Callie.

I didn't think about Romance separating us until one person began standing out in every gathering we were at.

Life was so rich, like the cream on a crock of milk. I had been held by Haven Doyle in a slow dance at the grange party, and I knew I wanted him for the rest of my life. He was so strong and clear-eyed. Daddy said you could tell a good man by the way he looked you in the eye.

I took Daddy's word for it.

We were seventeen, you and I, Callie. We even looked alike with our thick black hair and greenish eyes.

"Oh, I wish it could always be summer." I held my arms out, feeling the breeze that wound through the trees, chasing my cotton skirt against my legs. Remember cotton dresses, Callie? The ironing we had to do. You couldn't escape from the ironing. "Of course, there are more gatherins in the winter. Don't you just love gatherins, Callie?"

"I did. Now . . ." You just stopped walking.

We were standing near the open grave they'd dug for old Mr. Gunther to be lowered into that afternoon. That was in the days before they stopped being so open about dying and started hiding the burying part. Now you feel like the body in the casket is going to be left there in the open—like at some Indian tribes' ceremonies.

I wanted to tell you about Haven, Callie. Haven. His name said it all. I'd bring him home to the farm. All the other girls had married away from the land. I'd bring Daddy a strong man better than any hired hand. They already got along together. I'd watch them at picnics and threshings and such. Strong arms folded across their chests, they'd stand talking and nodding, now and then one of them making a point with a strong hand moving through the air.

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Callie, I was all but dancing among the clouds. When Haven caught me watching, I'd have to turn away or be struck down by the light in his eyes. Oh, Callie, you wouldn't believe . . . or would you?

"I'm going to have a baby." You said it in such a rushed whisper I knew you couldn't have said what I heard. "I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh, Callie, no!" A girl who had babies was a—a what? Especially if there was never a man to make an honest woman of her. At least now people understand other people's human failings. "How? We're always together."

"Not always." Did you regret all those times you ran off? I don't think so. I think you might have regretted that you'd be found out.

No, not always. All those times we were hanging clothes, Callie. Working in the vegetable garden. Times I drove the tractor for Daddy.

"Who, Callie? Will he marry you?" I whispered. "Does he know?" I remember the shadow that crossed your face then. I knew he knew, and he had denied it. "What will we do? Who could it be? You never picked out anyone . . ."

As you started to run, you said one word, and then you tripped over a clod of dirt, I thought. Your arms flung out and it was as if you flew into Mr. Gunther's grave. How I'd dreamed of flying but not the landing.

I remember the scream cut off by that awful dull thump as you disappeared before my eyes.

Callie!

"Callie!" I screamed, and only common sense kept me from jumping into the grave beside you.

I knelt there, looking at you lying front down in the fresh dirt. There was blood where there shouldn't have been blood. I thought you were dead until you moved, first a hand, then your head. The little I could see of your face was so white. You spoke.

Oh, Callie, why did you speak again? Why did you put it into my head a second time?

I ran then. I ran like everything, screaming, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" the whole way.

Callie.

They rushed you to the hospital in the bed of Daddy's pickup. Momma padded it with half the quilts in the house.

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You spent weeks in the hospital, and I sat there beside your bed every day. A stray shot, they said. Some town person hunting groundhogs. He wouldn't know how far a bullet could travel. Sometimes beyond a person's view.

Lucky Callie. Any closer and he'd have killed you outright. Yes, lucky.

Callie, you could have gotten better if you'd wanted to.

After so many terrible weeks, they brought you home and laid you in your bed. People came to help. Haven did chores, held me in his arms, but he never asked to visit you. Everyone else did. They wanted to see, to go away and talk about what they'd seen.

By the time it was all over, everyone knew I was Haven's and he was mine. He'd prove to be a pillar of strength for the family.

Only Momma and the hospital people knew about the baby that didn't survive the shock. I pretended I didn't know. You might have disappointed Momma, but she never let on. Momma didn't believe in "bad blood." She said what a person did was his own to claim or deny. People would think what they would anyhow.

Callie. How long you lasted, broken and bent, never knowing a soul who stood beside your bed, only looking at each one and turning away.

Haven was so patient. I couldn't start a new life as long as you needed me. It was months, but he came every day, at times for just a few minutes. I saw in his eyes that he would wait forever.

I did marry him, Callie. We had four children, and not a farmer among them, which was only natural, I guess. We had moved away from farming early on. My oldest sister Grace wanted to bring her family back to the land anyhow. She had sons and a husband eager to learn. Daddy finally had his boys.

There could have been another farm for us, but I steered Haven to a town job. Your passing gave me the strength I didn't know I had for steering him to suit my own mind. He was a good carpenter, so it wasn't like giving him a bad life. Besides, bright as he was, he could have learned anything.

Oh, I missed the farm, Callie, the openness of it. We went for visits with both our families but never for long enough. It was always a taste and no more. I still get an ache for it, for you. I miss the cool springhouse where we'd snitch sips of chilled buttermilk.

There wasn't a day went by that I didn't mention my Callie. You became as familiar to my children as if you'd come there for visits. Your name still comes up at family get-togethers.

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"Tell us about Callie. How she'd sneak away and leave you with all the work." "Tell us about Callie and the cemetery flowers." I tell that one often. No one ever hears about the baby.

I lived fifty years with Haven, Callie. I bore his children because I wanted babies and welcomed each baby of the next generation, but we never called any of them Callie. Only you were Callie.

I lived fifty years with Haven, and every day of those years I knew him in ways he never knew me.

Fifty years and three months. On the day Haven died, six days after he'd been struck down by a stroke, and I could see the ending in his eyes, I leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"Callie."

I whispered because that's how you said his name just before the bullet went into your body and then again when you lay in that open grave. His name was the last word I ever heard you say. I wanted yours to be the last sound he heard. There was no crying for me, no tears.

I whispered to him, "Callie's man would've had his chance at running the farm—same as the rest of our men. You didn't have to shoot. Not me or Callie."

Callie, to this day, even when I'm surrounded by all the babies I wanted, it lays on my mind.

Which one did he mean for? And why, Callie? Couldn't we have worked it out, like you and I always did? I'd have let him go, for you and your baby.

All I know is, every day for fifty years and three months I took away a little piece of his life just by saying your name. I could see it in his eyes.

Callie.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Puzzle

Anonymous

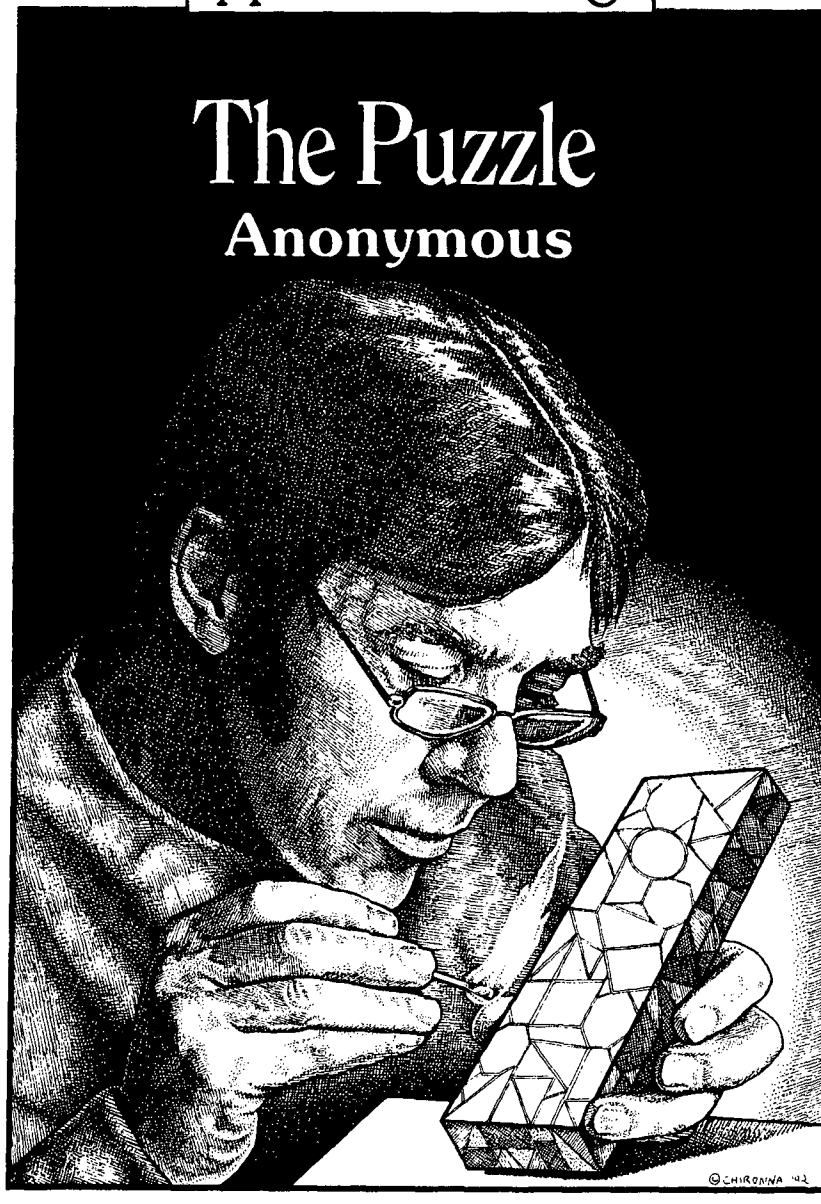


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Pugh came into my room holding something wrapped in a piece of brown paper.

"Tress, I have brought you something on which you may exercise your ingenuity." He began, with exasperating deliberation, to untie the string which bound his parcel; he is one of those persons who would not cut a knot to save their lives. The process occupied him the better part of a quarter of an hour. Then he held out the contents of the paper.

"What do you think of that?" he asked. I thought nothing of it, and I told him so. "I was prepared for that confession. I have noticed, Tress, that you generally do think nothing of an article which really deserves the attention of a truly thoughtful mind. Possibly, as you think so little of it, you will be able to solve the puzzle."

I took what he held out to me. It was an oblong box, perhaps seven inches long by three inches broad.

"Where's the puzzle?" I asked.

"If you will examine the lid of the box, you will see."

I turned it over and over; it was difficult to see which was the lid. Then I perceived that on one side were printed these words:

PUZZLE: TO OPEN THE BOX

The words were so faintly printed that it was not surprising that I had not noticed them at first. Pugh explained.

"I observed that box on a tray outside a second-hand furniture shop. It struck my eye. I took it up. I examined it. I inquired of the proprietor of the shop in what the puzzle lay. He replied that that was more than he could tell me. He himself had made several attempts to open the box, and all of them had failed. I purchased it. I took it home. I have tried, and I have failed. I am aware, Tress, of how you pride yourself upon your ingenuity. I cannot doubt that, if you try, you will not fail."

While Pugh was prosing, I was examining the box. It was at least well made. It weighed certainly under two ounces. I struck it with my knuckles; it sounded hollow. There was no hinge; nothing of any kind to show that it ever had been opened, or, for the matter of that, that it ever could be opened. The more I examined the thing, the more it whetted my curiosity. That it could be opened, and in some ingenious manner, I made no doubt—but how?

The box was not a new one. At a rough guess I should say that it had been a box for a good half century; there were certain signs

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of age about it which could not escape a practiced eye. Had it remained unopened all that time? When opened, what would be found inside? It *sounded* hollow; probably nothing at all—who could tell?

It was formed of small pieces of inlaid wood. Several woods had been used; some of them were strange to me. They were of different colors; it was pretty obvious that they must all of them have been hard woods. The pieces were of various shapes—hexagonal, octagonal, triangular, square, oblong, and even circular. The process of inlaying them had been beautifully done. So nicely had the parts been joined that the lines of meeting were difficult to discover with the naked eye; they had been joined solid, so to speak. It was an excellent example of marquetry. I had been over-hasty in my deprecation; I owed as much to Pugh.

"This box of yours is better worth looking at than I first supposed. Is it to be sold?"

"No, it is not to be sold. Nor—" he fixed me with his spectacles "—is it to be given away. I have brought it to you for the simple purpose of ascertaining if you have ingenuity enough to open it."

"I will engage to open it in two seconds—with a hammer."

"I dare say. *I* will open it with a hammer. The thing is to open it without."

"Let me see." I began, with the aid of a microscope, to examine the box more closely. "I will give you one piece of information, Pugh. Unless I am mistaken the secret lies in one of these little pieces of inlaid wood. You push it, or you press it, or something, and the whole affair flies open."

"Such was my own first conviction. I am not so sure of it now. I have pressed every separate piece of wood; I have tried to move each piece in every direction. No result has followed. My theory was a hidden spring."

"But there must be a hidden spring of some sort, unless you are to open it by a mere exercise of force. I suppose the box is empty."

"I thought it was at first, but now I am not so sure of that either. It all depends on the position in which you hold it. Hold it in this position—like this—close to your ear. Have you a small hammer?" I took a small hammer. "Tap it softly, with the hammer. Don't you notice a sort of reverberation within?"

Pugh was right, there certainly was something within; something which seemed to echo back my tapping, almost as if it were a living thing. I mentioned this to Pugh.

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"But you don't think that there is something alive inside the box? There can't be. The box must be airtight, probably as much airtight as an exhausted receiver."

"How do we know that? How can we tell that no minute interstices have been left for the express purpose of ventilation?" I continued tapping with the hammer. I noticed one peculiarity, that it was only when I held the box in a particular position, and tapped at a certain spot, there came the answering taps from within. "I tell you what it is, Pugh, what I hear is the reverberation of some machinery."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Give the box to me." Pugh put the box to his ear. He tapped. "It sounds to me like the echoing tick, tick of some great beetle; like the sort of noise which a deathwatch makes, you know."

Trust Pugh to find a remarkable explanation for a simple fact; if the explanation leans toward the supernatural, so much the more satisfactory to Pugh. I knew better.

"The sound which you hear is merely the throbbing or the trembling of the mechanism with which it is intended that the box should be opened. The mechanism is placed just where you are tapping it with the hammer. Every tap causes it to jar."

"It sounds to me like the ticking of a deathwatch. However, on such subjects, Tress, I know what you are."

"My dear Pugh, give it an extra hard tap, and you will see."

He gave it an extra hard tap. The moment he had done so, he started.

"I've done it now."

"What have you done?"

"Broken something, I fancy." He listened intently, with his ear to the box. "No—it seems all right. And yet I could have sworn I had damaged something; I heard it smash."

"Give me the box." He gave it me. In my turn, I listened. I shook the box. Pugh must have been mistaken. Nothing rattled; there was not a sound; the box was as empty as before. I gave a smart tap with the hammer, as Pugh had done. Then there certainly was a curious sound. To my ear, it sounded like the smashing of glass. "I wonder if there is anything fragile inside your precious puzzle, Pugh, and, if so, if we are shivering it by degrees?"

"What *is* that noise?"

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I lay in bed in that curious condition which is between sleep and waking. When, at last, I *knew* that I was awake, I asked myself what it was that had woke me. Suddenly I became conscious that something was making itself audible in the silence of the night. For some seconds I lay and listened. Then I sat up in bed.

"What *is* that noise?"

It was like the tick, tick of some large and unusually clear-toned clock. It might have been a clock had it not been that the sound was varied, every half dozen ticks or so, by a sort of stifled screech, such as might have been uttered by some small creature in an extremity of anguish. I got out of bed; it was ridiculous to think of sleep during the continuation of that uncanny shrieking. I struck a light. The sound seemed to come from the neighborhood of my dressing table. I went to the dressing table, the lighted match in my hand, and as I did so, my eyes fell on Pugh's mysterious box. That same instant there issued, from the bowels of the box, a more uncomfortable screech than any I had previously heard. It took me so completely by surprise that I let the match fall from my hand to the floor. The room was in darkness. I stood, I will not say trembling, listening—considering their volume—to the *eeriest* shrieks I ever heard. All at once they ceased. Then came the tick, tick, tick again. I struck another match and lit the gas.

Pugh had left his puzzle box behind him. We had done all we could, together, to solve the puzzle. He had left it behind to see what I could do with it alone. So much had it engrossed my attention that I had even brought it into my bedroom, in order that I might, before retiring to rest, make a final attempt at the solution of the mystery. *Now* what possessed the thing?

As I stood, and looked, and listened, one thing began to be clear to me, that some sort of machinery had been set in motion inside the box. How it had been set in motion was another matter. But the box had been subjected to so much handling, to such pressing and such hammering, that it was not strange if, after all, Pugh or I had unconsciously hit upon the spring which set the whole thing going. Possibly the mechanism had got so rusty that it had refused to act at once. It had hung fire, and only after some hours had something or other set the imprisoned motive power free.

But what about the screeching? Could there be some living creature concealed within the box? Was I listening to the cries of some small animal in agony? Momentary reflection suggested that the explanation of the one thing was the explanation of the other.

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Rust?—there was the mystery. The same rust which had prevented the mechanism from acting at once was causing the screeching now. The uncanny sounds were caused by nothing more nor less than the want of a drop or two of oil. Such an explanation would not have satisfied Pugh; it satisfied me.

Picking up the box, I placed it to my ear.

"I wonder how long this little performance is going to continue. And what is going to happen when it is good enough to cease? I hope—" an uncomfortable thought occurred to me "—I hope Pugh hasn't picked up some pleasant little novelty in the way of an infernal machine. It would be a first-rate joke if he and I had been endeavoring to solve the puzzle of how to set it going."

I don't mind owning that as this reflection crossed my mind I replaced Pugh's puzzle on the dressing table. The idea did not commend itself to me at all. The box evidently contained some curious mechanism. It might be more curious than comfortable. Possibly some agreeable little device in clockwork. The tick, tick suggested clockwork which had been planned to go a certain time, and then—then, for all I knew, ignite an explosive, and—blow up. It would be a charming solution to the puzzle if it were to explode while I stood there, in my nightshirt, looking on. It is true that the box weighed very little. Probably, as I have said, the whole affair would not have turned the scale at a couple of ounces. But then its very lightness might have been part of the ingenious inventor's little game. There are explosives with which one can work a very satisfactory amount of damage with considerably less than a couple of ounces.

While I was hesitating—I own it!—whether I had not better immerse Pugh's puzzle in a can of water, or throw it out of the window, or call down Bob with a request to at once remove it to his apartment, both the tick, tick, tick, and the screeching ceased, and all within the box was still. If it *was* going to explode, it was now or never. Instinctively I moved in the direction of the door.

I waited with a certain sense of anxiety. I waited in vain. Nothing happened, not even a renewal of the sound.

"I wish Pugh had kept his precious puzzle at home. This sort of thing tries one's nerves."

When I thought that I perceived that nothing seemed likely to happen, I returned to the neighborhood of the table. I looked at the box askance. I took it up gingerly. Something might go off at any moment for all I knew. It would be too much of a joke if Pugh's

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precious puzzle exploded in my hand. I shook it doubtfully; nothing rattled. I held it to my ear. There was not a sound. What had taken place? Had the clockwork run down, and was the machine arranged with such a diabolical ingenuity that a certain interval was required, after the clockwork had run down, before an explosion could occur? Or had rust caused the mechanism to again hang fire?

"After making all that commotion the thing might at least come open." I banged the box viciously against the corner of the table. I felt that I would almost rather that an explosion should take place than that nothing should occur. One does not care to be disturbed from one's sound slumber in the small hours of the morning for a trifle.

"I've half a mind to get a hammer, and try, as they say in the cookery books, another way."

Unfortunately I had promised Pugh to abstain from using force. I might have shivered the box open with my hammer, and then explained that it had fallen, or got trod upon, or sat upon, or something, and so got shattered, only I was afraid that Pugh would not believe me. The man is himself such an untruthful man that he is in a chronic state of suspicion about the truthfulness of others.

"Well, if you're not going to blow up, or open, or something, I'll say goodnight."

I gave the box a final rap with my knuckles and a final shake, replaced it on the table, put out the gas, and returned to bed.

I was just sinking again into slumber when that box began again. It was true that Pugh had purchased the puzzle, but it was evident that the whole enjoyment of the purchase was destined to be mine. It was useless to think of sleep while that performance was going on. I sat up in bed once more.

"It strikes me that the puzzle consists in finding out how it is possible to go to sleep with Pugh's purchase in your bedroom. This is far better than the old fashioned prescription of cats on the tiles."

It struck me the noise was distinctly louder than before; this applied both to the tick, tick, tick, and the screeching.

"Possibly," I told myself as I relighted the gas, "the explosion is to come off this time."

I turned to look at the box. There could be no doubt about it; the noise was louder. And, if I could trust my eyes, the box was moving—giving a series of little jumps. This might have been an optical delusion, but it seemed to me that at each tick the box gave a little bound. During the screeches—which sounded more like the

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cries of an animal in an agony of pain even than before—if it did not tilt itself first on one end, and then on another, I shall never be willing to trust the evidence of my own eyes again. And surely the box had increased in size; I could have sworn not only that it had increased, but that it was increasing, even as I stood there looking on. It had grown, and still was growing, both broader, and longer, and deeper. Pugh, of course, would have attributed it to supernatural agency; there never was a man with such a nose for a ghost. I could picture him occupying my position, shivering in his nightshirt, as he beheld that miracle taking place before his eyes. The solution which at once suggested itself to me—and which would *never* have suggested itself to Pugh!—was that the box was fashioned, as it were, in layers, and that the ingenious mechanism it contained was forcing the sides at once both upward and outward. I took it in my hand. I could feel something striking against the bottom of the box, like the tap, tap, tapping of a tiny hammer.

"This is a pretty puzzle of Pugh's. He would say that that is the tapping of a deathwatch. For my part I have not much faith in deathwatches, *et hoc genus omne,* but it certainly is a curious tapping; I wonder what is going to happen next?"

Apparently nothing, except a continuation of those mysterious sounds. That the box had increased in size I had, and have, no doubt whatever. I should say that it had increased a good inch in every direction, at least half an inch while I had been looking on. But while I stood looking its growth was suddenly and perceptibly stayed; it ceased to move. Only the noise continued.

"I wonder how long it will be before anything worth happening does happen! I suppose something is going to happen; there can't be all this to-do for nothing. If it is anything in the infernal machine line, and there is going to be an explosion, I might as well be here to see it. I think I'll have a pipe."

I put on my dressing gown. I lit my pipe. I sat and stared at the box. I dare say I sat there for quite twenty minutes when, as before, without any sort of warning, the sound was stilled. Its sudden cessation rather startled me.

"Has the mechanism again hung fire? Or, this time, is the explosion coming off?" It did not come off; nothing came off. "Isn't the box even going to open?"

It did not open. There was simply silence all at once, and that was all. I sat there in expectation for some moments longer. But I sat for nothing. I rose. I took the box in my hand. I shook it.

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"This puzzle *is* a puzzle." I held the box first to one ear, then to the other. I gave it several sharp raps with my knuckles. There was not an answering sound, not even the sort of reverberation which Pugh and I had noticed at first. It seemed hollower than ever. It was as though the soul of the box was dead. "I suppose if I put you down, and extinguish the gas and return to bed, in about half an hour or so, just as I am dropping off to sleep, the performance will be recommenced. Perhaps the third time will be lucky."

But I was mistaken—there was no third time. When I returned to bed that time I returned to sleep, and I was allowed to sleep; there was no continuation of the performance, at least so far as I know. For no sooner was I once more between the sheets than I was seized with an irresistible drowsiness, a drowsiness which so mastered me that I—I imagine it must have been instantly—sank into slumber which lasted till long after day had dawned. Whether or not any more mysterious sounds issued from the bowels of Pugh's puzzle is more than I can tell. If they did, they did not succeed in rousing me.

And yet, when at last I did awake, I had a sort of consciousness that my waking had been caused by something strange. What it was I could not surmise. My own impression was that I had been awakened by the touch of a person's hand. But that impression must have been a mistaken one, because, as I could easily see by looking round the room, there was no one in the room to touch me.

It was broad daylight. I looked at my watch; it was nearly eleven o'clock. I am a pretty late sleeper as a rule, but I do not usually sleep as late as that. That scoundrel Bob would let me sleep all day without thinking it necessary to call me. I was just about to spring out of bed with the intention of ringing the bell so that I might give Bob a piece of my mind for allowing me to sleep so late when my glance fell on the dressing table on which, the night before, I had placed Pugh's puzzle. It had gone!

Its absence so took me by surprise that I ran to the table. It *had* gone. But it had not gone far; it had gone to pieces! There were the pieces lying where the box had been. The puzzle had solved itself. The box was open, open with a vengeance, one might say. Like that unfortunate Humpty Dumpty, who, so the chroniclers tell us, sat on a wall, surely "all the king's horses and all the king's men" never could put Pugh's puzzle together again!

The marquetry had resolved itself into its component parts. How those parts had ever been joined was a mystery. They had been

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laid upon no foundation, as is the case with ordinary inlaid work. The several pieces of wood were not only of different shapes and sizes, but they were as thin as the thinnest veneer; yet the box had been formed by simply joining them together. The man who made that box must have been possessed of ingenuity worthy of a better cause.

I perceived how the puzzle had been worked. The box had contained an arrangement of springs, which, on being released, had expanded themselves in different directions until their mere expansion had rent the box to pieces. There were the springs, lying amid the ruin they had caused.

There was something else amid that ruin besides those springs; there was a small piece of writing paper. I took it up. On the reverse side of it was written in a minute, crabbed hand: "A Present For You." What was a present for me? I looked and, not for the first time since I had caught sight of Pugh's precious puzzle, could scarcely believe my eyes.

There, poised between two upright wires, the bent ends of which held it aloft in the air, was either a piece of glass or—a crystal. The scrap of writing paper had exactly covered it. I understood what it was, when Pugh and I had tapped with the hammer, had caused the answering taps to proceed from within. Our taps caused the wires to oscillate, and in these oscillations the crystal, which they held suspended, had touched the side of the box.

I looked again at the piece of paper. "A Present For You." Was *this* the present—this crystal? I regarded it intently.

"It *can't* be a diamond."

The idea was ridiculous, absurd. No man in his senses would place a diamond inside a twopenny-halfpenny puzzle box. The thing was as big as a walnut! And yet—I am a pretty good judge of precious stones—if it was not an uncut diamond it was the best imitation I had seen. I took it up. I examined it closely. The more closely I examined it, the more my wonder grew.

"It *is* a diamond!"

And yet the idea was too preposterous for credence. Who would present a diamond as big as a walnut with a trumpery puzzle? Besides, all the diamonds which the world contains of that size are almost as well known as the Koh-i-noor.

"If it is a diamond, it is worth—it is worth—heaven only knows what it isn't worth if it's a diamond."

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I regarded it through a strong pocket lens. As I did so, I could not restrain an exclamation.

"The world to a China orange, it *is* a diamond!"

The words had scarcely escaped my lips than there came a tapping at the door.

"Come in!" I cried, supposing it was Bob. It was not Bob, it was Pugh. Instinctively I put the lens and the crystal behind my back. At sight of me in my nightshirt Pugh began to shake his head.

"What hours, Tress, what hours! Why, my dear Tress, I've breakfasted, read the papers and my letters, came all the way from my house here, and you're not up!"

"Don't I look as though I were up?"

"Ah, Tress! Tress!" He approached the dressing table. His eye fell upon the ruins. "What's this?"

"That's the solution to the puzzle."

"Have you—have you solved it fairly, Tress?"

"It has solved itself. Our handling, and tapping, and hammering must have freed the springs which the box contained, and during the night, while I slept, they have caused it to come open."

"While you slept? Dear me! How strange! And—what are these?"

He had discovered the two upright wires on which the crystal had been poised.

"I suppose they're part of the puzzle."

"And was there anything in the box? What's this?" He picked up the scrap of paper; I had left it on the table. He read what was written on it: " 'A Present For You.' What's it mean? Tress, was this in the box?"

"It was."

"What's it mean about a present? Was there anything in the box besides?"

"Pugh, if you will leave the room I shall be able to dress; I am not in the habit of receiving quite such early calls, or I should have been prepared to receive you. If you will wait in the next room, I will be with you as soon as I'm dressed. There is a little subject in connection with the box which I wish to discuss with you."

"A subject in connection with the box? What is the subject?"

"I will tell you, Pugh, when I have performed my toilet."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Do you propose, then, that I should stand here shivering in my shirt while you are prosing at your ease? Thank you; I am obliged,

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but I decline. May I ask you once more, Pugh, to wait for me in the adjoining apartment?"

He moved toward the door. When he had taken a couple of steps, he halted.

"I—I hope, Tress, that you're—you're going to play no tricks on me?"

"Tricks on you! Is it likely that I am going to play tricks upon my oldest friend?"

When he had gone—he vanished, it seemed to me, with a somewhat doubtful visage—I took the crystal to the window. I drew the blind. I let the sunshine fall on it. I examined it again, closely and minutely, with the aid of my pocket lens. It *was* a diamond; there could not be a doubt of it. If, with my knowledge of stones, I was deceived, then I was deceived as never man had been deceived before. My heart beat faster as I recognized the fact that I was holding in my hand what was, in all probability, a fortune for a man of moderate desires. Of course, Pugh knew nothing of what I had discovered, and there was no reason why he should know. Not the least! The only difficulty was that if I kept my own counsel, and sold the stone and utilized the proceeds of the sale, I should have to invent a story which would account for my sudden accession to fortune. Pugh knows almost as much of my affairs as I do myself. That is the worst of these old friends!

When I joined Pugh I found him dancing up and down the floor like a bear upon hot plates. He scarcely allowed me to put my nose inside the door before attacking me.

"Tress, give me what was in the box."

"My dear Pugh, how do you know that there was something in the box to give you?"

"I know there was!"

"Indeed! If you know that there was something in the box, perhaps you will tell me what that something was."

He eyed me doubtfully. Then, advancing, he laid upon my arm a hand which positively trembled.

"Tress, you—you wouldn't play tricks on an old friend."

"You are right, Pugh, I wouldn't, though I believe there have been occasions on which you have had doubts upon the subject. By the way, Pugh, I believe that I am the oldest friend you have."

"I—I don't know about that. There's—there's Brasher."

"Brasher! Who's Brasher? You wouldn't compare my friendship to the friendship of such a man as Brasher? Think of the tastes we

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have in common, you and I. We're both collectors."

"Ye-es, we're both collectors."

"I make my interests yours, and you make your interests mine. Isn't that so, Pugh?"

"Tress, what—what was in the box?"

"I will be frank with you, Pugh. If there had been something in the box, would you have been willing to go halves with me in my discovery?"

"Go halves! In your discovery, Tress! Give me what is mine!"

"With pleasure, Pugh, if you will tell me what is yours."

"If—if you don't give me what was in the box I'll—I'll send for the police."

"Do! Then I shall be able to hand to them what was in the box in order that it may be restored to its proper owner."

"Its proper owner! I'm its proper owner!"

"Excuse me, but I don't understand how that can be; at least, until the police have made inquiries. I should say that the proper owner was the person from whom you purchased the box, or, more probably, the person from whom he purchased it, and by whom, doubtless, it was sold in ignorance, or by mistake. Thus, Pugh, if you will only send for the police, we shall earn the gratitude of a person of whom we never heard in our lives—I for discovering the contents of the box, and you for returning them."

As I said this, Pugh's face was a study. He gasped for breath. He actually took out his handkerchief to wipe his brow.

"Tress, I—I don't think you need to use a tone like that to me. It isn't friendly. What—what was in the box?"

"Let us understand each other, Pugh. If you don't hand over what was in the box to the police, I go halves."

Pugh began to dance about the floor.

"What a fool I was to trust you with the box! I knew I couldn't trust you." I said nothing. I turned and rang the bell. "What's that for?"

"That, my dear Pugh, is for breakfast, and, if you desire it, for the police. You know, although you have breakfasted, I haven't. Perhaps while I am breaking my fast, you would like to summon the representatives of law and order." Bob came in. I ordered breakfast. Then I turned to Pugh. "Is there anything you would like?"

"No, I—I've breakfasted."

"It wasn't of breakfast I was thinking. It was of—something else. Bob is at your service, if, for instance, you wish to send him on an errand."

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"No, I want nothing. Bob can go." Bob went. Directly he was gone, Pugh turned to me. "You shall have half. What was in the box?"

"I shall have half?"

"You shall!"

"I don't think it is necessary that the terms of our little understanding should be expressly embodied in black and white. I fancy that, under the circumstance, I can trust you, Pugh. I believe that I am capable of seeing that, in this matter, you don't do me. That was in the box."

I held out the crystal between my finger and thumb.

"What is it?"

"That is what I desire to learn."

"Let me look at it."

"You are welcome to look at it where it is. Look at it as long as you like, and as closely."

Pugh leaned over my hand. His eyes began to gleam. He is himself not a bad judge of precious stones, is Pugh.

"It's—it's—Tress!—is it a diamond?"

"That question I have already asked myself."

"Let me look at it! It will be safe with me! It's mine!"

I immediately put the thing behind my back.

"Pardon me, it belongs neither to you nor to me. It belongs, in all probability, to the person who sold that puzzle to the man from whom you bought it—perhaps some weeping widow, Pugh, or hopeless orphan—think of it. Let us have no further misunderstanding upon that point, my dear old friend. Still, because you are my dear old friend, I am willing to trust you with this discovery of mine, on condition that you don't attempt to remove it from my sight, and that you return it to me the moment I require you."

"You're—you're very hard on me." I made a movement toward my waistcoat pocket. "I'll return it to you!"

I handed him the crystal, and with it I handed him my pocket lens.

"With the aid of that glass I imagine that you will be able to subject it to a more acute examination, Pugh."

He began to examine it through the lens. Directly he did so, he gave an exclamation. In a few moments he looked up at me. His eyes were glistening behind his spectacles. I could see he trembled.

"Tress, it's—it's a diamond, a Brazil diamond. It's worth a fortune!"

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"I'm glad you think so."

"Glad I think so! Don't you think that it's a diamond?"

"It appears to be a diamond. Under ordinary conditions I should say, without hesitation, that it was a diamond. But when I consider the circumstances of its discovery, I am driven to doubts. How much did you give for that puzzle, Pugh?"

"Ninepence; the fellow wanted a shilling, but I gave him ninepence. He seemed content."

"Ninepence! Does it seem reasonable that we should find a diamond, which, if it is a diamond, is the finest stone I ever saw and handled, in a ninepenny puzzle? It is not as though it had got into the thing by accident, it had evidently been placed there to be found, and, apparently, by anyone who chanced to solve the puzzle; witness the writing on the scrap of paper."

Pugh reexamined the crystal.

"It is a diamond! I'll stake my life that it's a diamond!"

"Still, though it be a diamond, I smell a rat!"

"What do you mean?"

"I strongly suspect that the person who placed that diamond inside that puzzle intended to have a joke at the expense of the person who discovered it. What was to be the nature of the joke is more than I can say at present, but I should like to have a bet with you that the man who compounded that puzzle was an ingenious practical joker. I may be wrong, Pugh; we shall see. But, until I have proved the contrary, I don't believe that the maddest man that ever lived would throw away a diamond worth, apparently, shall we say a thousand pounds?"

"A thousand pounds! This diamond is worth a good deal more than a thousand pounds."

"Well, that only makes my case the stronger; I don't believe that the maddest man that ever lived would throw away a diamond worth more than a thousand pounds with such utter wantonness as seems to have characterized the action of the original owner of the stone which I found in your ninepenny puzzle, Pugh."

"There have been some eccentric characters in the world, some very eccentric characters. However, as you say, we shall see. I fancy that I know somebody who would be quite willing to have such a diamond as this, and who, moreover, would be willing to pay a fair price for its possession; I will take it to him and see what he says."

"Pugh, hand me back that diamond."

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"My dear Tress, I was only going—"

Bob came in with the breakfast tray.

"Pugh, you will either hand me that at once, or Bob shall summon the representatives of law and order."

He handed me the diamond. I sat down to breakfast with a hearty appetite. Pugh stood and scowled at me.

"Joseph Tress, it is my solemn conviction, and I have no hesitation in saying so in plain English, that you're a thief."

"My dear Pugh, it seems to me that we show every promise of becoming a couple of thieves."

"Don't bracket me with you!"

"Not at all, you are worse than I. It is you who decline to return the contents of the box to its proper owner. Put it to yourself, you have *some* common sense, my dear old friend!—do you suppose that a diamond worth more than a thousand pounds is to be *honestly* bought for ninepence?"

He resumed his old trick of dancing about the room.

"I was a fool ever to let you have the box! I ought to have known better than to have trusted you; goodness knows you have given me sufficient cause to mistrust you! Over and over again! Your character is only too notorious! You have plundered friend and foe alike—friend and foe alike! As for the rubbish which you call your collection, nine-tenths of it, I know as a positive fact, you have stolen out and out."

"Who stole my Sir Walter Raleigh pipe? Wasn't it a man named Pugh?"

"Look here, Joseph Tress!"

"I'm looking."

"Oh, it's no good talking to you, not the least! You're—you're dead to all the promptings of conscience! May I inquire, Mr. Tress, what it is you propose to do?"

"I *propose* to do nothing, except summon the representatives of law and order. Failing that, my dear Pugh, I had some faint, vague, very vague idea of taking the contents of your ninepenny puzzle to a certain firm in Hatton Garden who are dealers in precious stones, and to learn from them if they are disposed to give anything for it, and if so, what."

"I shall come with you."

"With pleasure, on condition that you pay the cab."

"I pay the cab! I will pay half."

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"Not at all. You will either pay the whole fare, or else I will have one cab and you shall have another. It is a three-shilling cab fare from here to Hatton Garden. If you propose to share my cab, you will be so good as to hand over that three shillings before we start."

He gasped, but he handed over the three shillings. There are few things I enjoy so much as getting money out of Pugh!

On the road to Hatton Garden we wrangled nearly all the way. I own that I feel a certain satisfaction in irritating Pugh, he is such an irritable man. He wanted to know what I thought we should get for the diamond.

"You can't expect to get much for the contents of a ninepenny puzzle, not even the price of a cab fare, Pugh."

He eyed me, but for some minutes he was silent. Then he began again.

"Tress, I don't think we ought to let it go for less than—than five thousand pounds."

"Seriously, Pugh, I doubt whether, when the whole affair is ended, we shall get five thousand pence for it, or, for the matter of that, five thousand farthings."

"But why not? Why not? It's a magnificent stone—magnificent! I'll stake my life on it."

I tapped my breast with the tips of my fingers.

"There's a warning voice within my breast that ought to be in yours, Pugh! Something tells me, perhaps it is the unusually strong vein of common sense which I possess, that the contents of your ninepenny puzzle will be found to be a magnificent do—an ingenious practical joke, my friend."

"I don't believe it."

But I think he did; at any rate, I had unsettled the foundations of his faith.

We entered the Hatton Garden office side by side; in his anxiety not to let me get before him, Pugh actually clung to my arm. The office was divided into two parts by a counter which ran from wall to wall. I advanced to a man who stood on the other side of this counter.

"I want to sell you a diamond."

"*We* want to sell you a diamond," interpolated Pugh.

I turned to Pugh. I "fixed" him with my glance.

"*I* want to sell you a diamond. Here it is. What will you give me for it?"

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Taking the crystal from my waistcoat pocket, I handed it to the man on the other side of the counter. Directly he got it between his fingers, and saw what it was that he had got, I noticed a sudden gleam come into his eyes.

"This is—this is rather a fine stone."

Pugh nudged my arm. "I told you so."

I paid no attention to Pugh. "What will you give me for it?"

"Do you mean, what will I give you for it cash down upon the nail?"

"Just so—what will you give me for it cash down upon the nail?"

The man turned the crystal over and over in his fingers.

"Well, that's rather a large order. We don't often get a chance of buying such a stone as this across the counter. What do you say to—well—to ten thousand pounds?"

Ten thousand pounds! It was beyond my wildest imaginings. Pugh gasped. He lurched against the counter.

"Ten thousand pounds!" he echoed.

The man on the other side glanced at him, I thought, a little curiously.

"If you can give me references, or satisfy me in any way as to your *bona fides,* I am prepared to give you for this diamond an open check for ten thousand pounds, or if you prefer it, the cash instead."

I stared; I was not accustomed to see business transacted on quite such lines as those.

"We'll take it," murmured Pugh; I believe he was too much overcome by his feelings to do more than murmur. I interposed.

"My dear sir, you will excuse my saying that you arrive very rapidly at your conclusions. In the first place, how can you make sure that it is a diamond?"

The man behind the counter smiled.

"I should be very ill-fitted for the position which I hold if I could not tell a diamond directly I get a sight of it, especially such a stone as this."

"But have you no tests you can apply?"

"We have tests which we apply in cases in which doubt exists, but in this case there is no doubt whatever. I am as sure that this is a diamond as I am sure that it is air I breathe. However, here is a test."

There was a wheel close by the speaker. It was worked by a treadle. It was more like a superior sort of traveling-tinker's grind-

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stone than anything else. The man behind the counter put his foot upon the treadle. The wheel began to revolve. He brought the crystal into contact with the swiftly revolving wheel. There was a s—s—sh! And, in an instant, his hand was empty; the crystal had vanished into air.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. I never saw such a look of amazement on a human countenance before. "It's splintered!"

POSTSCRIPT

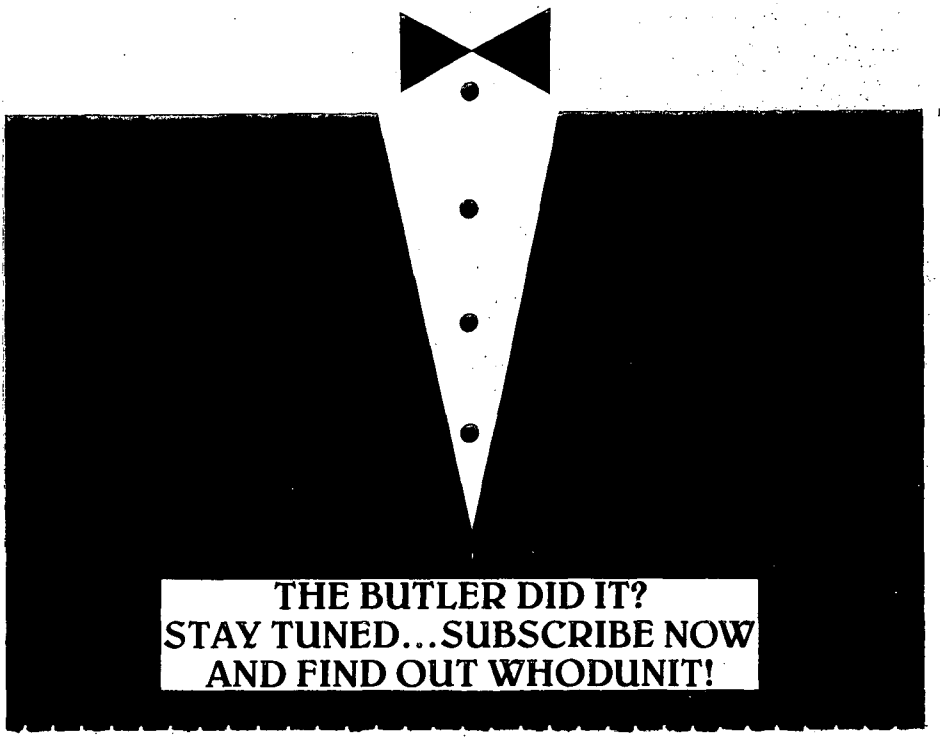
It *was* a diamond, although it *had* splintered. In that fact lay the point of the joke. The man behind the counter had not been wrong; examination of such dust as could be collected proved that fact beyond a doubt. It was declared by experts that the diamond, at some period of its history, had been subjected to intense and continuing heat. The result had been to make it as brittle as glass.

There could be no doubt that its original owner had been an expert, too. He knew where he got it from, and he probably knew what it had endured. He was aware that, from a mercantile point of view, it was worthless; it could never have been cut. So, having a turn for humor of a peculiar kind, he had devoted days, and weeks, and possibly months, to the construction of that puzzle. He had placed the diamond inside, and he had enjoyed, in anticipation and in imagination, the Alnaschar visions of the lucky finder.

Pugh blamed me for the catastrophe. He said, and still says, that if I had not, in a measure, and quite gratuitously, insisted on a test, the man behind the counter would have been satisfied with the evidence of his organs of vision, and we should have been richer by ten thousand pounds. But I satisfy my conscience with the reflection that what I did at any rate was honest, though, at the same time, I am perfectly well aware that such a reflection gives Pugh no sort of satisfaction.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



People are talking about a first novel by Nancy Atherton, as well they might, for **Aunt Dimity's Death** is a charmer (Viking, $19). Lori Shepherd was raised by her widowed mother, a strong and cheerful woman who could always lift her daughter's spirits by narrating the adventures of Aunt Dimity, a fearless lady in faraway England. Lori is now grown up, her mother suddenly gone, her marriage washed up, and her prospects of keeping the wolf away from her Boston apartment door fairly grim. Irate burglars, angered at the poor pickings to be found in her flat, have even trashed poor Reginald, the stuffed rabbit who was her childhood boon companion. "When I learned of Aunt Dimity's death," Lori opens the novel, "I was stunned. Not because she was dead, but because I had never known she'd been alive." But Aunt Dimity *is* dead, leaving behind a legacy with eccentric terms.

Virginia and Felix Freer are back again in E. X. Ferrars' latest, **Beware of the Dog** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, $17). If you haven't met one of mystery fiction's most mismatched couples, then do so. As always, Virginia narrates in her solid, common-sense British voice. She recounts the peaceful death of one of her neighbors in the small country town where she lives—quite apart from Felix, by the way. Helen Lovelock was eighty-eight years old and had lived a comfortable life. Now her death means a sizable inheritance for both her niece Kate and her long-lost nephew Nick, who is recently arrived from Australia. But when one of the heirs is murdered, Virginia is coaxed into inviting her clever and charming husband (whom she's never bothered to divorce) back into her organized life to ferret out the truth.

Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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Marissa Piesman's narrator had me laughing aloud more than once in **Heading Uptown** (Delacorte, $18.95), but then I have a soft spot for the kind of smart-aleck Manhattan slang that's the standard speech pattern for youngish single Jewish lawyers like Nina Fischman. Not that there's anyone like Nina Fischman, exactly. Nor does one run across the likes of Ida, her mother, very often (thankfully). As mother and daughter are on the way to the funeral of Ida's oldest friend, Nina is reminded that she is the executrix of the woman's estate. Who would have thought that her son would predecease Ida's friend? Certainly not Nina, who keeps reminding everyone that she's actually a real estate attorney. The plaint goes unheeded, however, and Nina stops even mentioning it when the woman's young granddaughter asks for Nina's help in finding out the truth about her father's death. A good plot, memorable characters, and not a few quotable quips make *Heading Uptown* well worth the trip.

Maggie Elliott stars in Elizabeth Atwood Taylor's mysteries; **The Northwest Murders** (St. Martin's, $18.95) is the latest. Maggie has been struck low with chronic fatigue syndrome, a debilitating and depressing condition that forces her to take a leave from her job as a private eye in San Francisco. Her partner offers her the use of Aunt Bessie's secluded cabin in northern California. His Aunt Bessie is now dead, and he has left everything the way it was. Taylor has packed this tale with goodies: a vicious serial killer, the gentle mystery of a journal left by a long-dead woman, a budding romance, and a subplot that raises the question of Native American land rights. There's even a bear and a treasure hunt. Maggie is a strong character, both interested and interesting, and if her stay at Aunt Bessie's isn't as peaceful as she'd hoped it would be, it certainly makes for exciting reading.

The Mad Courtesan (St. Martin's, $18.95) is Edward Marston's latest in the Elizabethan series featuring Nicholas Bracewell, stage manager for the prestigious theater troupe known as Westfield's Men. This, the fifth in the series, opens with the vicious murder of a well-born and talented young actor in the company, Sebastian Carrick. Nicholas was Sebastian's friend, and at the behest of the boy's father (who is imprisoned in the Tower because he arranged a marriage frowned upon by Queen Bess), the book holder agrees to bring the killer to justice. Meanwhile, there are rumblings that the queen is mortally ill, and the political battle for succession could mean that Westfield's Men will be pushed out

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of favor by their fiercest rivals. Nicholas is a likeable hero, his landlady/lover is splendid, the company and its strong personalities are exasperating and amusing by turns, and *The Mad Courtesan* should bring Marston fans among the hordes of folk who like their history with a dash of mystery.

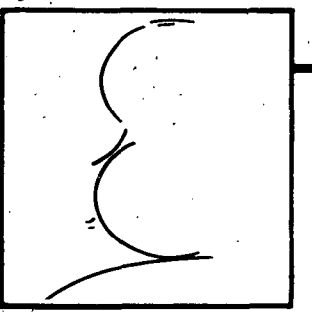
An African setting was no small part of the appeal of Karin McQuillan's *Deadly Safari,* and now her latest, **Elephant's Graveyard** (Ballantine, $18), is available. The author spent time in Africa with the Peace Corps, and her knowlege of the terrain is evident on every page. Her protagonist is Jazz Jasper, an American who barely manages to support herself in her chosen homeland by running photographic safari tours. She and her policeman friend Omondi have driven out to spend the day with Emmet Laird, a wealthy American who runs and funds the Save the Elephants campaign. But a pleasant day with good friends is not on the calendar when they discover Emmet's body under the sun near the elephants' watering hole. And Jazz is not going to make Omondi any friendlier if, rather than leaving the job to the police, she accepts the request of the dead man's lover to find out what happened. If mystery lovers read books in this genre to go places, meet new people, and learn something new, I heartily recommend Karin McQuillan as a tour guide.

David Handler's Stewart "Hoagy" Hoag series has moved from paperback original into hardcover, which is tough on tight budgets. **The Boy Who Never Grew Up** (Doubleday Perfect Crime, $16.50) deserves, however, to grace the shelves of libraries for years to come. Hoagy and his faithful basset hound Lulu are again commissioned to ghost-write a celebrity's memoir. This time it's off to Tinseltown and Matthew Wax, boy genius, oddball millionaire, creator of America's best-loved celluloid small town, and husband to cinema darling Pennyroyal Brim, leading lady in Wax's blockbuster movies and dubbed "America's Sweetheart." But Hoagy finds the American Dream gone awry: Max and Penny are bitterly fighting over custody of their infant son, Max is literally living on the set of his last great movie, and those nearest the boy wonder are seriously beginning to doubt his sanity. What's worse, they're beginning to suspect that he'll never write another box office smash. Urbane, witty, and mellow, Hoagy is the perfect foil to the outrageous characters of Handler's Hollywood. Handler continues giving us Hoagy's unusual takes on celebrity life in America, and this picture of the film world is nervy and funny.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



A Few Good Men has a few great performances, which culminate in a tense courtroom battle between Tom Cruise as a navy lawyer and Jack Nicholson as a hard-core marine colonel. The courtroom drama, while gripping, contains few real surprises. Nonetheless, the story, adapted to the screen by Aaron Sorkin from his successful Broadway play, is riveting and highly entertaining.

Sorkin's story, directed here by Rob Reiner, is based on a true incident at the American naval base at Cuba's Guantanamo Bay. A pair of marines have killed a fellow marine (a) in the course of an unauthorized disciplining, or (b) as a result of orders from superior officers.

The military establishment seems eager to dispose of the case as quickly as possible so no one gets embarrassed. Tom Cruise, as Lieutenant Daniel Kaffe, is the hotshot young lawyer assigned to defend the two men charged with the murder.

Kaffe's claims to fame are his late father, who was respected as a navy judge and attorney general, and his penchant for quick case disposal. "I've plea-bargained forty-four cases," he brags. And this kid is only a year out of law school and nine months in the navy.

By contrast, fellow attorney Demi Moore, as Lieutenant Commander Joanne Galloway, is extra serious about her work. She's a navy internal affairs officer overseeing the case who winds up working with Kaffe. While Kaffe seems more interested in his softball game than in defending his clients, Galloway is a strictly by-the-book officer.

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At first the two clash constantly over the direction of the defense, but they become good friends. That they don't wind up in the sack together is a credit to this film. Although Moore's role isn't as central as Cruise's or Nicholson's, it is a relief to see an attractive actress as a professional woman who isn't required to get into bed with a man to prove her worth in a film.

Private First Class William Santiago, the murder victim, had been angling to get transferred out of Guantanamo when he was killed. He had written pleading letters to officials outside his chain of command and offered information on an unauthorized shooting into Cuban territory in exchange for a transfer.

That, according to "Gitmo" protocol, was a no-no. And the victim was punished for it, although perhaps somewhat more than was intended.

As the film progresses, it becomes apparent that while the defendants, played by Wolfgang Bodison (Corporal Dawson) and James Marshall (Pfc. Downey), did attack Santiago, they are pawns in a bigger game.

Kiefer Sutherland gives a scary, intense performance as the bristle-headed Lieutenant Jonathan Kendrick, a strait-laced, fanatical Guantanamo officer who only answers to his superior officers and to Jesus.

Nicholson gives a bravura performance, snarling and smirking all the way. He's a pit bull in uniform, with a cigar.

"I eat breakfast three hundred yards from a thousand Cubans who are trained to kill me," he says to explain the necessity for strict discipline.

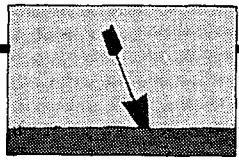
Cruise does well as the at-first-hesitant defense lawyer. He provides a good balance of goofiness (he never has a pen when he needs to take notes) and seriousness.

Almost all the main characters—Kevin Bacon as the prosecutor and Cruise's friendly adversary should also be noted—are interesting and give excellent performances. Despite their brief screen appearances, Bodison as the proud marine defendant who steadfastly follows the code—unit, corps, country—and Marshall as the dumb-as-dirt country-bumpkin codefendant, make memorable impressions.

Although the trial is central to what's going on, we find the two defendants in this murder case secondary to the machinations of the lawyers and the military bureaucracy. The almost casual treatment of the fate of the defendants is a little troublesome, but the *mano a mano* courtroom exchanges more than make up for it.

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THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Christopher Wyler Harris of Van Nuys, California. Honorable mentions go to Barbara Allen of College Park, Maryland; Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; Jan Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Joan Sonnenburg of Merrickville, Ontario, Canada; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Frank Heiberger of DeRidder, Louisiana; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; Margaret S. Chaiet of West Hills, California; and Kristen Demers of West Springfield, Massachusetts.

Photo by Bob Adelman/Magnum

STRAIGHT ARROW by Christopher Wyler Harris

I've always been one to part my hair on the side, so when Klanger's bullet parted my hair down the middle, I was pretty pissed off. Not that I had time to ponder matters of style, for I found myself flinching violently, slipping on the damp slate roof.

A slate roof, forty feet up, is no easy place to catch your balance. I did have a choice, though: relax and kiss the museum's marble terrace at terminal velocity or drop my gun and grab the arrow on the weather vane. Once, in high school, an attractive young woman propositioned me. *This* decision was faster. I barely caught the arrow, which broke free of its main support one second later. Damn. However, that moment of grace allowed me to grab the main support with my other arm.

Klanger had seen my gun go flying. He crept along the roof's peak to come closer and gloat.

"Hey, copper, you ought to be in the Olympics for the way you tossed your rod."

With that close a shave I had barely avoided tossing my cookies. Copper? Rod? Was this notorious art thief a Neanderthal from the thirties? He kept it up.

"Say yer prayers, flatfoot."

I did, to the patron saint of haircuts and Saint Frisbee. So doing, I whipped the metal arrow underhanded and parted Klanger's eyebrows.

The arrow must have fallen out on the way down. We found it near Klanger's body, stuck into the ground.

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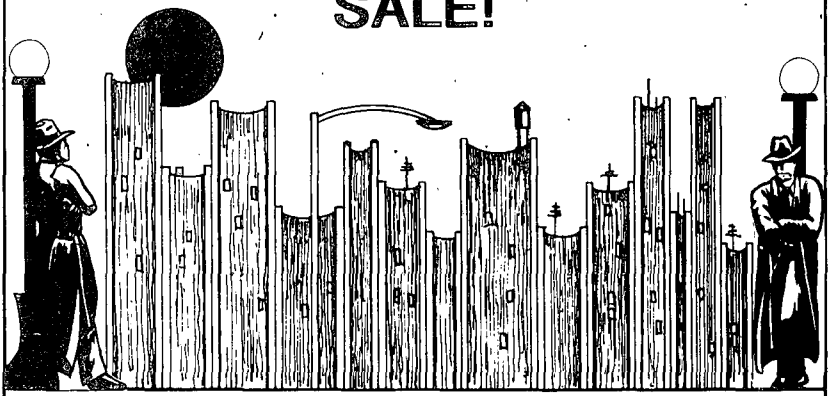
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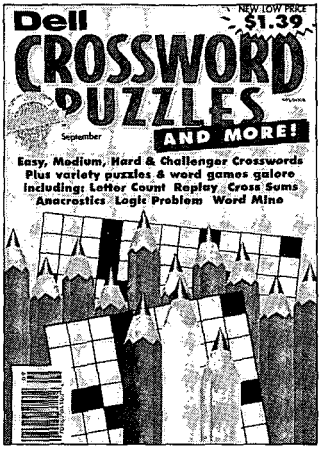
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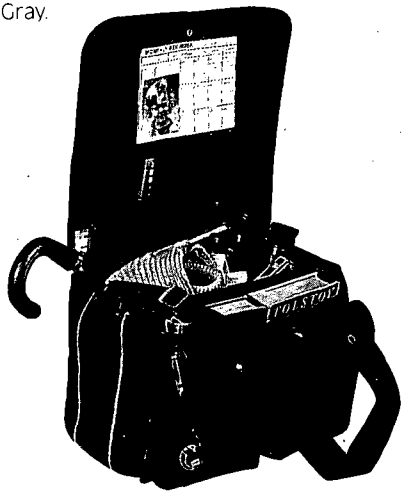
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